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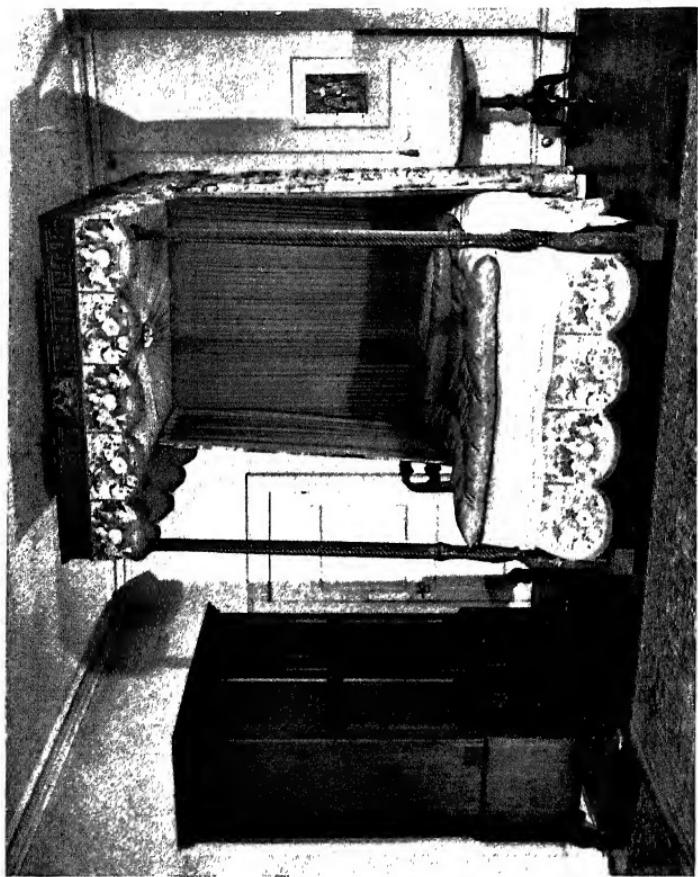
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THE NEW PLEASURE

*Verse*

BOARD ROOM BALLADS





A Biedermeier type in kingwood. The delicate twist of the posts is based on a classical model. The frieze with the Greek key pattern foreshadows the great development of painted furniture that was inspired by the brothers Adam. *Circa* 1760. The mahogany cupboard with drawers in the base and the tripod table with the hinged top are mid-eighteenth-century types.

# ENGLISH FURNITURE

BY  
**JOHN GLOAG**

With twenty-four pages of illustrations  
from photographs  
and fifteen from line drawings  
by E. J. Warne

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The furniture illustrated on the following plates is from the collection of Robert Atkinson, Esq., F.R.I.B.A.: I, II, VI (lower illustration), VIII, IX, X, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVIII, and XX.

The furniture on Plate V and the upper part of Plate VI is in the possession of Fleetwood Pritchard, Esq., and that shown on Plate VII belongs to H. P. Shapland, Esq., A.R.I.B.A. The settle on the lower part of Plate XI is the property of J. Craven Pritchard, Esq. The furniture on the following plates is in the author's possession: III (upper illustration), IV, and XIX.

## INTRODUCTION

THIS is not a technical book. Nor is it an academic manual for collecting antique furniture. Its chapters attempt to show how English furniture design has since A.D. 1500 reflected the changes in national taste, and how a tradition of comfort and comeliness has been maintained, whether furniture has been made from oak or mahogany or plated tubular steel and plywood. Good proportions are more important than mere age: a truth that has been forgotten since the cult of antique furniture achieved its easy popularity. This book is concerned only with furniture of good proportion. Its illustrations have been chosen to provide examples of good design in the past and the present. Its first two chapters sketch the historical background of design from 1500 to 1934, and then, chapter by chapter, it describes the evolution of different furniture types, relating the changes that occur in design and decoration in each period to that basic source of inspiration in design—architecture.

Furniture design has never been isolated. Directly or indirectly it has been influenced by the ideas of architects. It is possible that we are now beginning a phase of direct control by architects over all branches of design. The Georgian period shows us that such a possibility is wholly agreeable. The influence of the architectural profession may indeed restore to us our lost heritage: a civilised setting for everyday life.

The illustrations in line, most of which were drawn originally by Mr. E. J. Warne for my book *Time, Taste and Furniture*, and are reproduced here by his permission, show representative examples of furniture from each period. They are guides to shape, and the study of them supplemented by visits to the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Geffrye Museum will familiarise the student of design with the characteristic proportions of different types. The illustrations in half-tone show particularly interesting pieces of furniture from different periods. Most of them are now published for the first time, including all those in the collection of Mr. Robert Atkinson, F.R.I.B.A.

The practical business of buying furniture claims one of the chapters, and the final chapter surveys the literature of furniture, and suggests how the study of design or the practice of collecting may be expanded by judicious reading.

The author is deeply in the debt of Mr. Robert Atkinson, who has taken the closest interest in the making of this book, has read much of the typescript and has made valuable suggestions. To Mr. E. J. Carter, the Librarian of the Royal Institute of British Architects, the author owes another debt of gratitude for his patience and ever resourceful scholarship during a particularly difficult bout of research work necessitated when the scaffolding of some of the early chapters was erected. The patience of Mr. Christian Barman, F.R.I.B.A., has also been put on trial by innumerable questions regarding the derivation of architectural terms for various operations in building, during the process of discovering whether they were invented first by builders or woodworkers. The illustration on page 3 was dis-

## INTRODUCTION

covered by Mr. Robert Atkinson in a French illustrated paper, dated 1878. Its inclusion in a book on English furniture is excused on the grounds that it is a portrait of the foreign ancestor of a contemporary fashion.

JOHN GLOAG



## CHAPTER I

### THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF DESIGN 1500-1700

BEFORE considering the history of English furniture-making, the mind should be cleared of romantic prejudices. Nothing that is ugly in its form or inept or clumsy in its construction should be respected simply because it is an 'antique'. The study of antique furniture design is interesting and instructive if it is undertaken as a research into the methods of skilled and extraordinarily patient men who solved technical problems and were inventive with a limited range of materials. But if such study is undertaken in what can only be described as a spirit of antiquarian adoration, if reverence for age as such debilitates appreciation for good proportion, then it degenerates into 'collecting' in the worst magpie sense. The aesthetic integrity of the 'collection' that results from these sentimental raids into the past of furniture-making is based on the fact of age, as facts are understood by antique dealers. The collector to whom dates have become more vital than design is beginning to part with his critical faculty. Mr. Aldous Huxley dealt, not unjustly, with the situation that arises from this state of mind when he wrote: 'A man can paint beautiful pictures in a slum, can write poetry in Wigan; and conversely he can live in an exquisite house, surrounded by masterpieces of ancient art, and yet (as one

## ENGLISH FURNITURE

sees almost invariably when collectors of the antique, relying for once on their own judgement, and not on tradition, "go in for" modern art) be crassly insensitive and utterly without taste'.<sup>1</sup>

Our furniture betrays our ideas to posterity in even greater detail than our architecture. The people who in 1934 furnish their houses with genuine (or imitation) antiques are illustrating for the benefit of the year A.D. 2000 the flight from realities which is so characteristic of political, economic and social life to-day. They dive into the past for comfort; so do our statesmen. The people who pant after the latest examples of stark, mechanistic steel furniture illustrate the fashionable revolutionary tendencies of the intelligentsia. This furniture of basic structural lines is supposed to represent a complete break with tradition. Actually it represents nothing of the kind, for unless human beings alter their physical proportions (by ceasing to be vertebrates or mammals, for instance), their bodies make certain unchanging demands upon furniture. The slinging of bandages of fabric from a frame to form the back and seat of a chair was an old idea even in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when leather and wood were used. Now tubular steel and leather or fabric are used; and thin steel frames were used in the seventies of the last century for café chairs in France. Chromium plating and the mechanical manipulation of tubes are the only contemporary contributions to this form of furniture.

In the past English furniture has always revealed the foibles of patrons and the limitations and enthusiasms of craftsmen and designers. The education of taste and the improvement or otherwise of manners and the

<sup>1</sup> *Along the Road, Part II.*

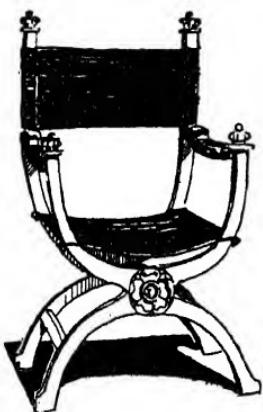


FIG. 1. (above) The French ancestor of the modern tubular steel chair: it existed in Paris fifty years ago.  
FIG. 2. (below) An early Tudor X-shaped chair. The structural lines of both types are similar.



## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF DESIGN

extravagance or sobriety of costume have all left indelible marks upon the shape and decoration of the things that have been made in wood since 1500.

Home life in Britain has enjoyed two long periods of urbane expansion in the past: one of them lasted for nearly four hundred years, and the other for just over two hundred, and they were separated by eleven centuries of barbarism. The first was when Britain was part of the Roman Empire; the second began when Inigo Jones started to design buildings, and ended in the eighteen-thirties. We are just a century away from the end of the last period. The external results of those periods of security and civilised development were similar. Possibly because there is more in Bernard Shaw's figure of Britannus in *Caesar and Cleopatra* than a figure of fun. The character of Britannus, the ancient Briton with the soul of a Victorian maiden aunt, implies that geography has something to do with preserving national character. What we know of those two periods suggests that something in the land preserves the same ideas of comfort, the same gifts and tastes, that, stimulated by prosperous security, combine to create a quiet welcoming domestic architecture and the sort of homes no other people can match.

The first period left no legacies in architecture. The rudimentary civilisation that followed it inherited ruins; for when the plenty and order of the Roman Province of Britain were destroyed by the barbarian invasions the destruction was complete. The Saxon and Jutish soldiers stamped their muddy feet over the mosaic pavements of the well-planned, centrally-heated houses of the Roman citizens of Britain, hacked at a statue or a column to try the strength of their weapons, even as the barbarian

conqueror of Constantinople centuries later smashed the column of serpents in the hippodrome with his mace. Soldiers are always the same, whether they are casually butchering an Archimedes because he doesn't stand up smartly to attention when spoken to, or stabbing their horses in a chapel to the detriment of a masterpiece of painting that adorns one of its walls, or shelling a cathedral with long-range guns. The old military desire to travel light caused the Saxon savages to burn what they could not conveniently loot; and in blood the dark ages began, and in blood they continued.

It was centuries before craftsmen gained the opportunity to round off the corners of the very rugged life that even the wealthy and powerful classes endured. All constructive and creative effort was diverted to church-building. In the castles furniture was elementary. Noblemen sat on benches and stools and chests, shivering in their furs with smarting eyes as the fire in the great hall puffed its smoke up to the roof. A chair was a rarity; a bed a mere nest of insects. Mediaeval furnishing seldom got beyond boxes and stools in their most elementary shapes; and although *the box and the stool are the basic forms of all furniture*, no skilled manipulation of those forms came to the service of comfort until the beginning of the sixteenth century. In the Middle Ages, luxury meant the addition of fabrics to the rigid shapes of furniture. Fabrics were hung around beds, draped over stools and tables, and hung on walls. Only upon the invention of chairs with X-shaped frames did fabrics become structurally associated with furniture.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The X-shaped chair frame was a re-discovery rather than an invention. Such chairs were used in Egypt over a thousand years before the Christian era. In a tomb painting in the British Museum (No. 10016) there is an X-

The structural rigidity of the Middle Ages haunted furniture design and furnishing until the maturity of that second period, which was even more Roman in taste and form than the Romano-British period itself, the English Renaissance. From 1620 until 1830 England enjoyed a period of unexampled harmony in building, and in the designing of everything connected with the making and decorating and furnishing of houses. But the harmonious adjustment of all these various branches of design took time. There was a preliminary period of aesthetic anarchy. In that period craftsmen were bewildered. They had become the victims of a new and fashionable form of education. They were not themselves subjected to this education. They merely felt the effect that such education had upon their lords and masters, the new gay-minded, travelling noblemen of the Renaissance.

Henry VII, who was one of the first modern statesmen, had pacified England and had made it fit for business men rather than heroes to live in. The enormous reserves of treasure which he accumulated were spent royally by that more than royal figure Henry VIII, and it was under Henry VIII that the new Renaissance nobility began to collect ideas from abroad; began to make those experiments in reading, in music, and in decorative art which inevitably disrupted English tradition, and destroyed the humble approach to work of other kind, work in stone, in wood and in iron. There were almost as many changes in the social structure in Eng-shaped stool with a deer seated thereon. This occurs in a satirical composition of animals taking the place of human beings at a feast (New Kingdom). A copy of a tomb painting by Mrs. de Garis Davies in the British Museum (from the tomb of Huy, Thebes No. 40, *circa* 1360 B.C.) shows an X-shaped stool; the subject of the painting is Nubian princes bringing trinkets.

## ENGLISH FURNITURE

land between the opening of the sixteenth century and the peak of Elizabethan prosperity as there were between the middle of the eighteenth century and the black individualism of prosperous Victorian industry. In all these social and economic changes the ruling classes had the fun because they set the fashions, and the men who worked with their hands, the craftsmen and the artisans, had their lives complicated by perplexity and, as the moral obligations of the Middle Ages faded, by poverty.

They were perplexed because something external was thrust upon them which they did not wholly understand; something called 'fashionable taste' which was invented abroad, admired by well-travelled gentlemen, and imported. Furniture did not escape from its modish influence, and in the Elizabethan period furniture grew bloated in form and was restlessly decorative. It is not always apprehended that the Elizabethan period was one of those unfortunate phases of economic and social life in England when wealth outran education, when a new rich class, although its artistic appreciation for literature and music was profound, had not yet acquired the restraint which enabled it to appreciate good proportions and shapes and surfaces untroubled by ornamentation. The furniture that was made between 1570 and 1620 was for the most part as barbarous in form and repellently profuse in decoration as the furniture that was made between 1840 and 1910. The workmanship was not yet debauched. Bad though the designs were, the late Elizabethan and early Stuart furniture was well made. It was the books of ornament which did the mischief, such as the works of Jean Vredeman Frison, whose popularity as an architectural guide was

considerable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *Les Cinq rangs de l'Architecture, à savoir Tuscane, Dorique, Ionique, Corinthiaque, et Composée, avec l'instruction fondamentale*, with plates by Henricus Hondius, was printed at Amsterdam, and judging by its frequent re-prints was a technical best-seller. Jean Vredeman Frison gave the classic orders a strong Dutch flavouring, and he illustrated all manner of queer, monstrous additions to them in the shape of ornament. Pre-war Tottenham Court Road 'Jacobean' occasionally jumps out of those faded plates. To the England of James I and Charles I those plates were modish pattern-books: they enabled fashion to defeat design.

It was not until the genius of Inigo Jones coaxed order out of ignorant confusion that the English Renaissance became a civilised movement in design instead of just a movement.

When craftsmen inherit a tradition of splendour in design and competence in execution it may injure their inventiveness and render them suspicious of new materials. During the early part of the seventeenth century the men who made furniture in England were oppressed by traditions that were in conflict with their sense of obligation to contemporary European ideas. The things they made were often ugly because of the confusion of thought that had marred the creation of their design. In the manner in which they decorated their furniture, the seventeenth-century craftsmen illustrated the changes that were taking place in their civilisation. When any form of culture breaks down or degenerates, and is replaced by a foreign culture or is followed by a barbaric interlude prior to the re-establishment of a national culture, a tendency to profusion in

ornament is often a symptom of the changes to which that particular civilisation is being subjected. The traditional culture of the Middle Ages, the forms, architectural, symbolical and ornamental, of the Gothic craftsmen, were interrupted in the first third of the sixteenth century; and thereafter those who tried to speak in that rich mediaeval language could only stammer. Some craftsmen were still stammering forgotten Gothic words in the seventeenth century, while they tried to master the fluent Italian language of ornament that had intrigued all Europe with its noble cadences for a hundred and fifty years.

The furniture-makers who served wealthy clients came directly under the influence of Court taste in architecture and decoration, that is to say under the influence of Inigo Jones; but the backbone of the furniture-making craft was in the country; and in the village workshops chair-makers and cabinet-makers, turners and carvers, were learning to shape and subdue materials and to devise forms that should serve and satisfy the needs of the time. A vast humanising influence was brought to the handling of that hard and beautiful material—oak. English oak is hard to work, even in these days of fine steel and machinery: three hundred years ago with tremendous pains and abundant common sense it was conquered by men who never gave a thought to ‘style’ or to ‘originality’ or to ‘modernism’. In the England of that day there was no self-conscious searching for something new; but there was untiring research to secure the maximum efficiency in use for the things that were made. Very simple and very practical aims governed the ideas of craftsmen, and the ornamenting of the furniture they created was a relief, a personal in-

dulgence, and, quite obviously, at times, a joke that had something of the infectious flavour of Gothic caricature about it. Cultivated Italian or French gentlemen of the period would have laughed at the results as crude, even as the Romans scorned the native Celtic art of the province of Britain twelve hundred years or so earlier. This sophisticated laughter was provoked by something that had died out in Europe, the common art of the people. All that the Stuart and Cromwellian craftsmen inherited from the tradition of English woodworking and the crafts that served architecture was executive competence. The greatness of Gothic design had gone: its symbolic significance was lost, and as it was unrepresentative of contemporary life it could no longer inspire the making of anything in wood or stone or metal.

But there remained a deep understanding of the appropriate enrichment of structural forms. The decoration of furniture became more pleasing as the seventeenth century progressed; the concessions made to the Italianate fashions of the early Stuart period were either abolished or greatly modified; and the restraint that denotes sureness of touch and taste distinguished the later Cromwellian and early Restoration work. For a space there was a balanced perfection in this national form of design, this last flowering of the common art of England, and then the lascivious court of Charles II diverted its eyes with foreign fashions, and again the English craftsman had to observe and absorb alien ideas.

It was during the Commonwealth that appreciation for foreign fashions began to grow in a fresh and healthy way. Many keen-eyed, cultivated gentlemen were travelling in those troubled years of England's republican experiment. It was the one safe way of escaping from

the variegated discomforts instituted by the intolerance of the Puritan 'Fanaticks'. Mr. John Evelyn, speaking French, Italian and Spanish, familiarised himself with Europe, while at home stern-faced men enforced with barbaric thoroughness the rigours of Puritan idealism. Observant of architecture, appreciative of painting and sculpture, and particularly intrigued by any example of mechanical ingenuity, John Evelyn showed in the pages of his *Diary* how receptive the English mind had become; how ready to absorb and to expand ably in a national idiom the intellectual and artistic stimulus of the Renaissance. What Evelyn was doing as an amateur to improve his taste, architects were also doing as part of their professional training. Studying antique models and admiring them and subjecting their imaginations to the discipline of Vitruvius in the proportions of the things they constructed in stone and wood, the English architects and designers who followed that great and tragic pioneer, Inigo Jones, never allowed their admiration of the antique to entrap them into exact and mindless copying. They understood a system of design, and presently they employed it with copious invention to solve contemporary problems of building. Wren's steeples, like St. Bride's, Fleet Street, or St. Magnus the Martyr in Billingsgate, had no antique prototypes; they were pure inventions, designed in accordance with an ancient system of architectural rhythms. And what was done so understandingly in stone in the last third of the seventeenth century was being done in wood by the opening of the eighteenth, and the great age of English furniture had begun.

That the civilised implications of that system of architectural design were comprehended by educated men

in the middle years of the seventeenth century is indicated by an early entry in Evelyn's *Diary* (4th November 1644) when he describes his visit to the Palace Farnezi: ' . . . a magnificent square structure, built by Michael Angelo of the 3 orders of columns after the ancient manner, and when Architecture was but newly recovered from the Gotic barbarity'. Again in referring to the great church at Sienne (21st May 1645) he admits with contemptuous surprise that 'the front of this building, tho' Gotic, is yet very fine'. In such terms did the English gentleman of the period dispose of the achievements of mediaeval design. How little succeeding generations respected the first efforts of English craftsmen to mask the forms evolved by 'Gotic barbarity' with the ornamental mannerisms of the Renaissance is suggested by another passage from Evelyn's *Diary* (10th November 1644) in which he refers to the furniture in Prince Ludovisio's villa: 'But what some look upon as exceeding all the rest, is a very rich bedstead (which sort of grosse furniture the Italians much glory in, as formerly did our grandfathers in England in their inlaid wooden ones) inlaid with all sorts of precious stones and antiq heads, onyxes, achates, and cornelians, esteem'd to be worth 80 or 90,000 crownes'.

'Gross furniture' certainly describes the over-ornamented beds and tables and cupboards that appeared in the half-century between 1570 and 1620. The Puritan interlude at least helped to rid English furniture of its vulgar profusion, and when all that Italianate stuff had been shed, and furniture had been slimmed back to the bare oak bones of structural needs, it was clear how strongly Gothic tradition had survived.<sup>1</sup> But this was

<sup>1</sup> There are Gothic 'pockets' of tradition in the twentieth century; notably

the last time it became nationally apparent. Already the woodworkers in villages all over England were doomed to the dictatorship of a new order, even as they had been subjected to the dictatorship of florid disorder by the Elizabethan new rich.

Furniture-making only illustrated one aspect of the final struggle for individualism that was made by English craftsmen. Not for individual freedom to 'express' themselves; but freedom to continue a tradition in which they worked naturally and happily. They retained some traces of independence until the restoration of Charles II. Until 1660 or thereabouts woodworkers had conducted their own affairs, had not been controlled by particular and precise dictatorship in design, but had followed, grumbly no doubt, the ideas of the nobility and gentry. But Charles II and his Court during their exile acquired more than a superficial regard for foreign ideas. Like John Evelyn, hundreds of gentlemen expanded their education by travelling in France and Holland and Italy. They learned to admire all sorts of new materials and forms.

Walnut began to take the place of that traditional material oak. Foreign craftsmen, with a mastery of new methods of decoration and construction, began to settle in London. English craftsmen became even more humble and were reduced to a position of artistic dependence and servitude. 'Nothing is more striking than

in the Cotswolds. 'Even to-day there are masons in this part of England who, left to themselves, shape stone to forms that are early Tudor in character. This they do quite naturally, for they have no veneer of sentimental antiquarianism, and they carve and cut and build as their fathers and grandfathers did before them, their family business forming the channel through which a Gothic tradition still flows untainted from its mediaeval source' (*Men and Buildings*, chap. ix, p. 165).

the inability of the English to stand by their native traditions in art', writes Professor G. M. Trevelyan.<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps because the English are not given to originating great movements in art or design. They absorb and adapt; but they use their borrowed ideas with such dignity, such restraint and simplicity, that what began as a copy may end as a thing of great original beauty. There is in England an undying impatience of grandiose ideas and effects.

In 1699 John Pomfret wrote 'The Choice', which summarises in its opening lines the English gentleman's conception of domestic and architectural felicity:

If Heaven the grateful liberty would give,  
 That I might chuse my method how to live,  
 And all those hours propitious Fate should lend  
 In blissful ease and satisfaction spend:  
 Near some fair town I'd have a private seat,  
 Built uniform; not little, nor too great;  
 Better if on a rising ground it stood,  
 On this side fields; on that a neighb'ring wood:  
 It should within no other things contain  
 But what are useful, necessary, plain:  
 Methinks 'tis nauseous, and I'd ne'er endure  
 The needless pomp of gaudy furniture.  
 A little garden, grateful to the eye,  
 And a cool rivulet run murmur'ring by,  
 On whose delicious banks a stately row  
 Of shady limes or sycamores should grow;  
 At th' end of which a silent study plac'd,  
 Should be with all the noblest authors grac'd.

The English people have always rebelled against palaces. Visions of grandeur have been flashed before them by great architects, but have been rejected or else so modified that little of their ornate impressiveness has

<sup>1</sup> *England under Queen Anne*, vol. i, chap. iv, p. 87.

been retained. Architects who have behaved in this way have been rapped over the knuckles by their clients and told abruptly to be practical. Sir John Vanbrugh, perhaps the greatest designer of palaces England has ever produced, suffered for his abilities. Blenheim was described by Pope as 'a labour'd quarry above ground', a description that Horace Walpole repeated with relish when criticising with his usual engaging lightness Vanbrugh's work; but Pope in that much-quoted verse that dealt specifically with Blenheim voiced the distaste of his countrymen for elaboration:

Thanks, sir, cried I, 'tis very fine,  
But where d'ye sleep, or where d'ye dine?  
I find, by all you have been telling,  
That 'tis a house, but not a dwelling.

Back comes the Englishman to the practical problems of comfort. When architects and furniture-makers and all craftsmen had not only a sense of fitness but a sense of design, and when the educated taste of their patrons encouraged good design, the solution of the problems of comfort in houses and furnishing was agreeable. The result was the golden age of furnishing which ended in the thirties of the nineteenth century when the English desire for comfort was no longer shaped and directed by a sense of design.

The direction of the work of English craftsmen by professional designers, by architects, decorators, artists and fashionable studio people, competent or incompetent as the case might be, came in the eighteenth century and persists to the present day. From the oak furniture that was made between 1640 and 1680, and from its decoration, we may read the real story of the death-bed scenes of mediaeval art in England.

## CHAPTER II

### THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF DESIGN

1700-1934

EARLY in the eighteenth century the sense of Order in design, which had influenced architecture since Inigo Jones had interpreted the spirit of the Renaissance, affected everything that was made in wood, metal or stone. A whole new world of relationships was created. Chairs and tables and coaches, state barges, lanterns, the stern galleries of men-of-war and merchant vessels, door knockers and drawer handles, key plates, fireplaces and chandeliers were all obviously and elegantly related.

In furniture the age of rugged fitness had passed. The chairs and tables and chests of those opening decades of the great century of design no longer illustrated the triumphant skill of the craftsman overpowering tough materials. Mastery of wood was no longer proclaimed by every line of the cabinet-maker's or chair-maker's work. There were impressive advances of skill in decoration. The delicate intricacies of marquetry enriched the surfaces of cabinets, cupboards and bureaux. The veneering of panels was practised, not (as is now often supposed) to provide a cheap way of covering up a cheap and possibly nasty wood with a thin layer of something more elaborate, but to gain the fullest possible decorative value from the beautiful

marking of such a wood as walnut. Veneering is a process that can only be carried out by expert craftsmen. It requires time and care and achieves ornamental results that would be impossible if solid panels of wood were used.

The decoration of furniture ceased to be a relaxation for the craftsman, carried out in the spirit of 'Now the job's finished, let's have a bit of fun with it!' The form of the article and its embellishment were conceived in detail before the work was begun. For example, the knees of cabriole legs were sometimes enriched with a carved shell device. This enrichment had to be planned exactly before the leg was made, so that the knee could be given extra thickness to enable the carver to cut back and shape the device. It could never be an afterthought, a 'bit of fun', like some of the chip carving done by Gothic woodworkers. To-day we occasionally find sets of Queen Anne chairs with carving on the knees that has blunted and flattened the subtle, swelling curve of the cabriole form and has made the legs too thin. But this is not the result of a blunder by some early eighteenth-century craftsman; it is usually the work of a modern dealer-cum-faker of antique furniture who has had this carving made on an old chair or set of chairs so that he can put up the price after ruining the proportion of the original design.

'Fitness for purpose', that elementary rule of design, was accepted by the craftsmen of the golden age; but it was not allowed to be a controlling influence. In France it was ignored altogether, and although English furniture was affected by French fashions it was always made with a solid regard for use and comfort. Not only were individual articles of furniture conceived in complete

detail before they were made, but sets and suites of furniture were designed. All hard lines were softened. Dutch taste, which was so powerful in the late seventeenth century, had introduced soft, swelling curves for the fronts of cupboards and cabinets; the cabriole leg for tables and chairs and cabinet-stands; and the supple intricacies of inlaid decoration.

During the first two decades of the eighteenth century furniture that had simplicity of form and enrichment and elegance of shape was made in England. For comfort and for the delight of the eye it has never been surpassed. Materials have changed. To-day we have chromium-plated tubular steel and canvas and rubber and patent leather and steel-sprung upholstery, devices transcending the dreams of any Queen Anne or Georgian designer, but no improvements have been made upon the beauty of the proportions or the comfort of the shape of the single chairs and elbow chairs and stuffed wing chairs, or upon the gracious lines of the tables and cupboards and chests and cabinets that were made when Queen Anne still reigned and that great Englishman, Sir Christopher Wren, was still Surveyor-General, and Sir John Vanbrugh, the architect of Blenheim Palace, was Comptroller of the Royal Works.

In early Georgian times furniture passed through a phase of heaviness. The clean simplicity of the Queen Anne work was replaced by a Germanic grossness, chairs and tables and bookcases and cabinets were overloaded with florid carving and gilding. Cabinet work became architectural in its form. A new and exquisite material was introduced, mahogany, which gradually replaced walnut. That gifted Yorkshireman, Thomas Chippendale, migrated to London, and with his able

contemporaries helped to rid furniture design of the coarseness that had thickened its lines. Great architects continued to be born, to be given opportunities to practise, and to make the most of their opportunities, and architectural design moulded the ideas of all designers. No matter what passing fashions engaged the attention of society, they were harmoniously accommodated by architects and furniture makers. Sir William Chambers' Chinese studies might impel Chippendale to design things in the 'Chinese Taste', or Horace Walpole's romantic stage scenery at Strawberry Hill might suggest to furniture designers that the 'Gothic Taste' was up-to-date. Whatever they made, they did not lose their sense of fitness or their sense of proportion until the end of the long Georgian period.

Thomas Sheraton has given his name to a style, and his sins as a designer are forgotten to-day, but a glance through his *Drawing Book* impresses the fact that his fancifulness occasionally bordered on the idiotic and the ravings of his pencil often anticipated the worst forms of later nineteenth-century taste. Although Sheraton began his career as a cabinet-maker, he actually made little furniture. He developed as a designer, and he stuck to his drawing-board, to his teaching of drawing, and to the publication of books of designs, diversifying these activities by preaching and writing tracts. He was never a great fashionable cabinet-maker like Chippendale. His work did not always escape the consequences of ornamental prolixity. He often displayed a delight in complexity that must have had a deplorable influence upon those who bought his books of designs.

His earlier work was elegant in its proportion; inclined to flimsiness, but very pleasantly decorative. He

used satinwood and mahogany and was lavish with delicate inlay and painted decoration. He discarded the cabriole leg and used instead for his chairs and sofas tapering legs or turned legs. But his undisciplined inventiveness marred his later work, and his interpretation of the French Empire fashions often took the form of rather vulgar essays in complication. He died in 1806, about the time when the Georgian period entered upon its last phase of taste, which was influenced so strongly by the fashions French designers were devising to appease the regal appetites of Napoleon.

The Court of the self-made Emperor with its blaze of uniforms demanded an imposing background. The delicate rhythms of the pre-Republican period were out of tune with ostentatious martial glamour; Louis-Seize designs that were contrived to match a life of carefully cultivated artificiality, when realities were dismissed as tiresome, when it was 'not done' to be practical, and when witty gossip was the most important matter in the world, were not the sort of designs for the power and glory and vulgarity of Napoleon. It was discovered that the virtues of blood and iron could be adequately reflected in gold and mahogany, judiciously cooled by marble, and inventively handled by designers who may have remembered a passing mode for Egyptian ornament that had appeared in the days of Louis XVI, or who may have wished to flatter Napoleon regarding his Egyptian exploits, although one would imagine that the Emperor would have found any reminder of that fiasco unwelcome. But Egyptian ornament was revived, and the domestic furniture of Greece and Rome was reproduced in mahogany and gilded bronze, and reproduced with such faithfulness that many of the examples of

furniture from the houses of Pompeii in the Naples Museum seem to have the atmosphere of Malmaison, a paradoxical situation brought about by the animation with which the Napoleonic designers studied the antique.

When English furniture-makers are influenced by French taste (and this happens about twice a century), they adjust the foreign ideas with considerable skill to the national ideas of comfort. The French Empire style had its reflection in English drawing-rooms and dining-rooms, and it represented an alliance of the grand manner with fitness for purpose. For a time the spidery tendencies of the later designs of Sheraton and his school were discarded in favour of strong and gracious curves; not the opulent curves of Queen Anne's time, but curves that had a firm continuity in the backs and legs of chairs. The genuflexions of the cabriole were absent: front legs on chairs curved inwards towards the back legs. There was formality and restraint and an agreeable understanding of the use of ornament. Lines of brass inlay gleamed in chair backs and legs, on tables and cabinets. Instead of the load of gilded bronze decoration that comforted Boney and his camp followers, mouldings, masks and patrae, bands and groups of delicate decoration, were carved in wood or composition, and gilded. The fluting of frames and legs was gilded. All this gold flashing in its ruddy mahogany setting gave to the simple lines of the furniture a richness of effect that was never ornate. There was a fashion for rosewood which began well in this period but which degenerated as the Victorian era approached.

The classic revival in furniture design, which was begun by the early nineteenth-century French designers, was the last example of the enlightened borrow-

ing of inspiration from antiquity. The influence of this revival, grafted on to the great eighteenth-century tradition of good proportion in design, remained until 1830. It swiftly collapsed after the first third of the nineteenth century, although it was perpetuated here and there in the country by some craftsman who was still spiritually in tune with the Georgian age. Country makers, as usual, were a decade or so behind the modes of the town, and this slowed up the transition from civilised design to absolute barbarism, so that between 1830 and 1850 many well-designed things were made. But the old generation of craftsmen died, and the less attractive pencil prophecies of Sheraton came true, but with a clumsiness that would have horrified Sheraton. Turning was used for the sake of the bulbs and blobs that could be produced for the uglification of chair and table legs. Debased scrollwork sprawled over the arms of chairs, over the backs of sideboards, over mirror frames. All technical ability was dedicated to ornamental effect, and the dissolution of proportion was unobserved, and in the chaos that ensued that basic principle of design, fitness for purpose, was altogether forgotten.

The reason why such gross and ill-proportioned furniture was accepted and even sought after was the complete change in the nature of patronage which had taken place since the close of the eighteenth century. Fashionable makers like Thomas Chippendale, Hepplewhite, Shearer, Ince and Mayhew, and many lesser men, were not only designers and craftsmen, or rather directors of craftsmen, but they were also in direct contact with their clients, or if they were not in direct contact with their clients, they were taking their orders from an architect. Both client and architect were educated people.

They knew what they wanted, and what they wanted was something which conformed to the accepted standards of taste; and standards of taste in the eighteenth century were good. A gentleman knew when a thing was well or ill proportioned. It was not then considered rather bad form to display intelligent appreciation for the design of things, for the shape of a chair or the section of a moulding.

The gentleman of fashion and the country gentleman did not represent the whole market for the maker of furniture. Mr. Chippendale and his kind were not above fulfilling a commission for a wealthy city merchant. It was not quite the same thing naturally as being patronised and owed money by, say, Charles James Fox, but it was business, and in those days when mere men of commerce knew their place, the city merchant was far too humble to assert his own taste. What was good enough for my lord was good enough for plain 'Mister', although the latter might be rolling in wealth from the profits accruing from the slave trade or some other congenial and paying commercial activity. Firms like Chippendale, Haig & Co.<sup>1</sup> were rather like exclusive tailors. They met the needs of a select clientele, occasionally permitting new clients to be added. It was not until the merchant class of customer began to be the most paying and the largest that patronage began to undergo the changes which led to the ultimate ascendancy of wholly uneducated taste. At first the new rich were humble. They were content to imitate the ideas of the old aristocracy. They were in that subdued state of ignorance when 'safety first' appears as the only possible slogan for social salvation. The furniture-makers, also

<sup>1</sup> Chippendale's business was continued under this title until about 1796.

playing for safety, began to make 'on spec'. They began to make for 'stock' rather than for individual orders. The individual orders had not ceased. But furniture businesses were growing through the patronage of the commercial class, and to a great extent this new form of trade had to be cultivated with stock. Only when the new rich began to have a little more confidence did they outgrow their first innocence in which they had accepted things of good proportion with awe rather than with pleasure, knowing that what pleased a lord must in the nature of things be above suspicion. Their growing confidence made them demand something that *looked* rich. The dignities and noblesimplicities of eighteenth-century design no longer satisfied their idea of affluent comfort.

This was happening nearly everywhere in Europe. England was not the only country dominated by gross and fantastically romantic taste. Orderliness was being forgotten. If we glance at the original illustrations of the *Pickwick Papers*, if we study Seymour's frontispiece, we see Mr. Pickwick dictating in what appears to be, in anticipation of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, a room dismal with Gothic junk, and we get a very vivid idea of the failing taste in furnishing, of the increasing tolerance of complication, of the gradual approach of chaos. Even as early as the *Pickwick Papers* the strictures of Dickens on the elaborate process of veneering prove how far the popular mind had drifted from any appreciation of skilled craftsmanship.<sup>1</sup> But through all the confusion,

<sup>1</sup> In the story of 'Tom Smart' (chap. xiv) in the tale told by the bagman, the old mahogany chair when addressed rather rudely by the hero of the story, says: 'That's not the way to address solid Spanish mahogany. Dam'me, you couldn't treat me with less respect if I was veneered.' Again, in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens describes Mr. and Mrs. Veneering in a way that suggests they were extremely shoddy and unpleasant people.

disorder and ignorance which came into the English home during the nineteenth century, the national affection for common sense prevented the rooms from becoming too hopelessly debased, too stupidly remote from realities.

There were in this period many eighteenth-century survivals both in furniture and architecture. In one of those early works of moral uplift dedicated to the spiritual elevation of the young, and entitled, *Perambulations in London and its Environs comprehending An Historical Sketch of the Ancient State, and Progress, of the British Metropolis. A Concise Description of its Present State, Notices of Eminent Persons, and a short account of The Surrounding Villages in Letters Designed for Young Persons*, by one Priscilla Wakefield, published during the Regency, there is a description of the London that the Victorians inherited from their educated forefathers:

'If the grandeur of a city is to be determined by the number of magnificent public edifices, Paris must be preferred to London; but if the prize is to be adjudged to the extent of its buildings; the regularity of its streets; the great number of squares; the appearance of industry, comfort, and wealth of its inhabitants;—London obtains the palm. The houses are of a red brick, and built with great uniformity, as to the outward appearance; though they differ much in the number and distribution of the apartments. The kitchens are mostly underground; and the first floor of retail dealers is occupied with the shops, which are arranged and decorated with the greatest neatness and taste. Above these are the rooms for receiving company; and the upper apartments supply the family with bed-chambers. The houses of the great, though generally plain on the outside, afford

every convenience and luxury within, that taste, elegance, and art can furnish.'

Priscilla Wakefield even turns the searchlight of her moral scrutiny upon the humbler English householders: 'I believe there is no nation more attentive to domestic comfort than the English; nor more ingenious to contrive every accommodation to render the home-fireside the most agreeable spot in the universe, though it should happen to be in a narrow street, where the light of the sun can scarcely penetrate. This love of home may be attributed to the amiable character and excellent conduct of the females of middle rank, who are in general admirable patterns of conjugal and maternal virtue; devoting their time to the regulation of their families, with a cheerful perseverance, and well-directed attention that endears them to their husbands, without exposing them to the notice of others, which would ill suit their modesty and diffidence, for which they are remarkable.' The 'modesty and diffidence' of those admirable patterns 'of conjugal and maternal virtue' no doubt prevented them from acquiring any semblance of a critical faculty which would have enabled them to exercise some check upon the ideas which makers of furniture presently produced.

The decay of manners which began with the French Revolution, and which was accelerated by the increase of prosperity in Britain, had its effect upon the form of furniture. The easy chair of the mid- and late-nineteenth century would have been regarded not only as an inelegant monstrosity a hundred years earlier, but its shape was such that nobody would have been willing to use it unless they were in a state of complete physical collapse. Until the nineteenth century people sat upright in chairs, and they were content with the very slightest of rakes

on the back of winged chairs and Windsor chairs. The habit of sitting upright did not pass without protest. In 1842 Captain Orlando Sabertash published *The Art of Conversation, with remarks on Fashion and Address*. He said: 'There is a practice getting into vogue, almost into a sort of fashion, among young gentlemen who wish to impose upon the unwary, by *nonchalant* airs of affected ease and freedom from restraint, which I must here denounce as a breach of good manners, and a want of all just feelings of propriety;—I mean the practice of lounging in graceless attitudes on sofas and armchairs, even in the presence of ladies. All these vile and distorted postures must be reserved for the library-couch, or arm-chair, and should never be displayed in the society of gentlemen, and still less in that of ladies. In their own houses, ladies must submit to such conduct, as they cannot well leave a visitor to himself: at all other times they should, if they have any respect for their own dignity, give the lounger the cut-direct, and go to some other part of the room. Once denounced, however, as vulgar and uncivil, the nuisance will cease of itself; for the guilty only offend, under the impression of being thought superlatively fine.' If you must lounge you must lounge in private. Unfortunately it did not remain a private habit. It has finally produced the enormous wallows of upholstery which are to-day described as easy chairs and which in a modern room, grouped about the thin warm line of an electric radiator, resemble, as Mr. Serge Chermayeff has said, 'a flock of elephants converging upon a glow-worm'.

In the Victorian age furniture designers imagined that three problems existed: (1) the provision of comfort; (2) the provision of useful accommodation; and (3)

the provision of ornamental effects. Comfort became associated with upholstered wallows and stuffy fabrics; to provide accommodation various complexities were invented, including the whatnot, the fern-stand, with 'art' pot above and shelves below, and the overmantel with its shelves and cupboards clustering about a mirror. Nothing was exempt from ornament, and no form of ornament was exempt from decorative futility. William Morris, in spite of his romantic mediaevalism and his almost complete dissociation from contemporary life, managed to revive a faint regard for fitness in design, which had a better effect upon the young men who came under his influence than it ever had upon his own passionately decorative work.

By his constant regard for the achievements of the Middle Ages, and by the antiquarian flavour this imparted to all his work and utterances, Morris was unwittingly responsible for the great antique revival that began with the twentieth century. The Victorian age died in the grip of that Continental nightmare, 'New Art'. The violence of that undisciplined fashion prejudiced the Edwardians against anything new at all, so English furnishing passed into a backward-looking phase, in which the past gave up its dead ideas, and the antique dealer was delighted with the nice, kind, credulous world.

A study of the pleasant things people had lived with in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did much to revive, not a sense of design it is true, but a strong sense of the monstrous clumsiness and ugliness of Victorian work. It also led to the discovery that English furniture of different periods could be associated. Whether he worked with oak, walnut or mahogany, the

English craftsman had always been actuated by a desire to make things comfortable, to give them an air of sturdy worth; and, generation after generation, this brought to the things he made a family likeness. In the early twentieth century there were craftsmen at work who were designing in the true English tradition; not copying old models, like so many craftsmen, who were compelled by popular demand to supplement the supply of genuine antiques. Designers like the late Ernest Gimson and Sidney Barnsley were creating twentieth-century furniture that could stand side by side with mid-seventeenth-century pieces, and be recognisably of the same sound English stock. It was from that period that Gimson and Barnsley drew their inspiration. Their furniture was designed to make the most of the natural decorative attributes of their material: the colour and the marking of the woods they used provided sufficient ornamentation, and they gave subtle emphasis to their designs by varying the surfaces of doors and panels and drawer fronts.

The Gimson and Barnsley school of design has created one of the two main branches of modern furniture. All the furniture Gimson made (he died in 1919) was intensely individual, but it was also intensely English. It was as English as anything that came out of a Cromwellian, Queen Anne or Georgian workshop. If Charles II had never returned from exile, and the influences that made the Commonwealth had retained their power, it is conceivable that the sort of furniture Gimson was making in the first two decades of our century would have been made in the sixteen-sixties and seventies. It is because of the kinship of Gimson's entirely original designs with the unsullied vigour of pure

English taste that found expression between 1640 and 1660 that the modern English furniture that owes its existence to his influence is particularly easy to associate with work of the seventeenth century and with the simpler furniture of Queen Anne's reign.

Since the War, the idea that original furniture design is even remotely akin to 'New Art' is dead. But the reluctance to adopt the furniture of our own time remains. The period styles cling, like old men of the sea, to our ideas. The period styles have not always come back to life with edifying effect: sometimes they have been caricatures. Terrible things have been done in the names of Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Sheraton; and from the earlier periods of furniture-making, all manner of uncouth monsters have been loosed into our rooms, simply because the label 'antique' has often been a passport for anything, good, bad or indifferent or undeniably ugly. In no other age has the majority of people preferred to imitate the ideas of a previous age; in no other age have people been fortunate enough to have such an abundance of fresh and agreeable designs from which to choose, designs representing two distinct schools.

The first school of design, based on the work of Gimson and Barnsley, is as comfortable and familiar as anything we may find in Stuart or Georgian England. It makes furniture on the assumption that houses and rooms will be much the same to-day and to-morrow as they have always been. This sort of modern furniture is part of the English tradition.

The second school is revolutionary. It is a reflection of the revolution that has taken place in architecture, and which may change in the course of half a century every established conception of house design. It departs

from the traditional materials for furniture-making, and slings decorative fabric between chromium-plated steel tubing, and creates the most comfortable chairs; it elevates sheets of plywood upon a severely simple steel framework, and the result is a light and not ungracious table. A commodious box of metal-faced plywood is clasped in a frame of steel tubing, and the result is a light and most practical sideboard.

This furniture demands a setting for itself. It cannot yet be associated with the things of tradition. It is primarily fit for its purpose. It is confined to a few basic shapes, for the form of a chair made of steel tubing cannot be greatly varied without indulging in quite needless complexity. It is the furniture of a new age; the age of steel and concrete and glass and standardisation. While it permits individual taste to flourish so far as fabrics are concerned, it imposes a complete simplicity upon furnishing, so that houses begin to approach the ideal of M. Le Corbusier, who has suggested that 'The house is a machine for living in'. This ideal must for ever be wholly abhorrent to English minds, for the English, bereft of frozen French logic, have an old-fashioned but comfortable idea that a house is a place in which to make a home.

Modern English furnishing can be designed to accommodate, in some isolated section of the house, examples of the furniture of what may be called the structural revolution. The dining-room, essentially a functional apartment where a certain mechanical efficiency is desirable, lends itself particularly to these slender things of plated steel or lacquered copper and leather and rubber and glass. But wood is wood, and there is something friendly about it; it is pleasant to touch and

to see. The whole history of English furnishing is a record of discoveries by craftsmen of the pleasant things that could be done with wood, with oak and beech, yewtree, applewood, cherry and elm, and, when fashion insisted, with walnut, mahogany, rosewood and satin-wood.

The missionaries and apologists for the latest efficiency furniture either ignore wood, or dismiss it as old-fashioned, or label it as an obsolete material. But wood has a tremendous advantage which the hard, bright materials of the ultra-modernists lack: it improves with age and mellows in colour year by year, unless it has been stupidly spoiled by some stain put on to create the illusion of an 'antique finish'.

While the work of such twentieth-century furniture designers as Sir Ambrose Heal, Gordon Russell and Ernest Gimson and Sidney Barnsley keep alive much that is best in English furniture, and while furniture that they have made or whose design they have influenced can appear side by side with the oak, walnut and mahogany furniture of the past, the furniture of the structural revolution must sit by itself. It may presently be designed in a manner that will enlarge the possibility of its use with other types of furniture, or it may in time eliminate all other types of furniture.

Already furniture by that talented Finnish architect, Alvar Aalto, illustrates a new humanised technique for the manipulation of plywood. His work, which was exhibited in London during the autumn of 1933, will unquestionably influence English designers in the use of this decorative and malleable material.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Excellent illustrations of this furniture were published in the *Architectural Review*, vol. lxxiv, No. 445, December 1933, pp. 220-21.

There is, of course, spurious modernism in furniture, even as there are spurious antiques. The 1925 Paris Exhibition of Decorative Art released an epidemic of florid ornament in this country, and upon chairs, beds, cabinets and other articles there was an outbreak of fruit and flowers and a profusion of mixed vegetation, all rendered in a flat, conventional way, and frequently enlivened with inappropriate colour. One good thing came to England from that Exhibition, and that was a reawakened interest in the decorative beauty of surfaces in wood. Amboyna, figured walnut and some of the Empire woods came into favour, and to give the utmost value to their natural ornamental qualities, carved enrichment was restricted.

Most periods have produced not only distinctive styles of furniture, but some distinctive pieces of furniture related to some new invention in comfort or manners or entertainment. Our opportunity has been the gramophone and the radio cabinet; and how we have used it! Disguise has been allowed to run amok! Only within the last year or so have manufacturers had the wit to employ designers like Gordon Russell and Betty Joel.

Few periods have been richer in potential influences for distinguished design than our own; and few periods have mishandled their opportunities with such repellent fertility. We are now emerging from the phase of nervous dependence upon tradition. As a result of that phase, cheap imitations of the most showy objects of the eighteenth-century squire's drawing-room are still crammed into the parlours of semi-detached England, where they gradually disintegrate as the final instalments for their purchase become due. But although we are saying good-bye to all that, we have only exchanged

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tyrants. Tradition has been dethroned, but the dictatorship of the *New Materials* has for a time tended to repress any little individual freedoms designers might have hoped to indulge. As we have seen, sympathetic understanding of the nature and limitations of material has in the past endowed English furniture design with agreeable character; but now we are in danger of exchanging that discerning mastery of materials for spineless servitude. Even 'fitness for purpose', which began as a piece of good, basic common sense, is sometimes used as a liturgical formula, which is chanted whenever imagination is exorcised from design.

The struggle to evolve a new technique of design which will regain the command of materials was shown very vividly at the Exhibition of British Industrial Art held in London in 1933. The furniture exhibits showed spirited progress; but it was disheartening to realise that those exhibits represented the exceptions to the ordinary output of the furniture industry. The furniture trade is not quite out of the Jacobean wood, and ever since the 1925 Paris Exhibition it has tried, with the aid of its hack draughtsmen, to associate the butterfly<sup>5</sup> gaiety of French ornament with the sort of timber<sup>in-</sup> nudism practised by the Gimson Barnsley school.

Clean surfaces of oak and walnut, innocent of staining, or maybe just limed; that's English, that was! bit plain? Well, shove in a bit of art! Strip of coloured inlay, or some bosses or swags in fruit-salad motifs (so French!) and its all nicely art-ed up. *That* is industrial design as interpreted by the bulk of the furniture industry.

Most of the inspiration in furniture design comes from outside the industry. From those independent

research workers in design, the artist-craftsmen, and frequently from architects—the only class in the whole community trained in design, and trained to think logically and lucidly about materials. There are a few individual firms in the furniture trade, controlled by men of taste and aesthetic discretion, who understand how to employ designers or who are designers themselves.

To-day we have these broad classifications of furniture design: the rustic school, or wood, dear wood, naked and unashamed. The mechanistic robotesque school, softened by a few concessions to coarse, commonplace ideas of comfort. And furniture designed by people who use imagination and not creeds for the shaping of their designs. But it is possible to choose contemporary designs that can make a twentieth-century domestic interior as tranquil in form and colour and as satisfying in visual and bodily comfort as any home in any other period of the history of English furniture-making.

### CHAPTER III

#### FURNITURE DESIGN UNDER THE WOOD-WORKERS, 1500-1660

CRAFTSMEN have nearly always worked under control. The picture of the craftsman wandering about the country carving this, that and the other object in wood and stone and splashing colour about with splendid freedom dates from the William Morris period. Since then the legend has been elaborated, not without the assistance of Messrs. Chesterton and Belloc, until the Middle Ages has become a gaudy confusion of craftsmen singing continuously, performing feats of pious artistry upon stonework, perched high up on the scaffolding of a new cathedral, or carving joyously (no mediaeval carver ever carved except joyously) some simple thing in oak, something worthy, something honest, something strong and everlasting. It is a pretty picture, but if it was described frankly as a vision instead of an authentic portrait of the Middle Ages it would be less misleading. Actually the work of the mediaeval craftsmen was rigidly controlled. It was not a casual activity nor a mystic, emotional calling, although the ornamental side of it must often have been recreation, and, judging by the amount of incomplete ornamental work, recreation that was often interrupted and seldom resumed.

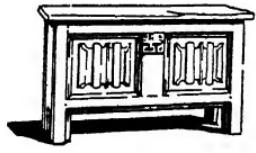
A man could not be a craftsman until he had sur-

vived the rigours of a long and severe training, nor was he allowed to practise and use good material unless those responsible for his training were satisfied with his ability. This system of training, controlled by the Guilds, prevented the direction of work from getting into incompetent hands. People who were mediocre in talent, although hard-working, did the less showy jobs. They made the unimportant things without having many opportunities for ornamenting their work.

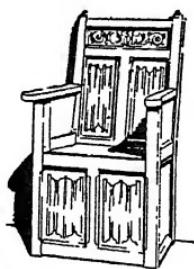
The earliest form of furniture which craftsmen were required to produce was the chest. Now the chest has a most respectable ancestry, going back to Greek and early Egyptian times.<sup>1</sup> In England it was the first receptacle, and it was also a seat. It was sturdy, fit for its purpose, and often unbeautiful in spite of the generally applicable formula that Norman Douglas expresses in the happy phrase: 'There is a beauty in fitness no art can enhance'. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries it was still the principal article of furniture in English houses, and the chests and coffers of those days have been grossly parodied and multiplied in our own time by the fakers of old England. The chest form has also inspired what may be called 'Garden Suburb Art' in some of its most unfortunate creations. There is nothing to admire in the crude strength of primitive furniture-making, but too often our own stimulating century is represented by inept imitations of pre-Tudor work, and the possibilities of contemporary materials are ignored.

The earliest chests in England were just boxes with lids to them. Inside when you opened the chest there was a little ledge or shelf just under the lid at the side.

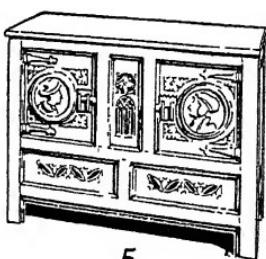
<sup>1</sup> The Egyptian mummy-case was a long chest.



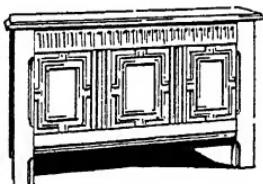
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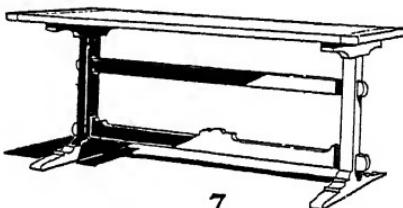
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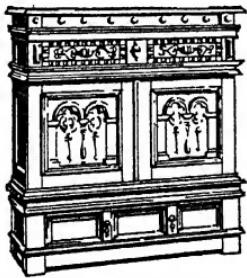
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FIG. 3. Early XVIth-century chest with linen-fold panels.

FIGS. 4, 5. Chair and low standing cupboard of the same period.

FIG. 6. Early XVIIth-century chest in oak.

FIG. 7. Early XVIth-century trestle table.

FIGS. 8, 9. Mid-XVIIth-century chest with drawers, and table.

FIG. 10. Early XVIIth-century oak sideboard table.



This ledge or shelf is found in the earliest chests that have survived.<sup>1</sup> We think, perhaps rightly, of the mediaeval house as a place haunted by very strong and evil smells. Habits in the castle were as casual and insanitary as they were in the serf's hovel. But smells of an agreeable delicacy were appreciated, perhaps far more than they are to-day when we have exchanged the smell of stagnant sewage for the fumes of petrol. The ledge in early English chests was put there to accommodate lavender or some other sweet herb, perhaps dried woodruff, so that the contents would be fragrant. Sometimes this ledge is mistakenly described as a place where money was kept. While some chests had secret receptacles for valuables, it is obvious that an open ledge in the most get-at-able place immediately below the lid would not be used for storing them.

The terms 'chest' and 'coffer' are, according to some authorities, interchangeable.<sup>2</sup> *Cofre* is the archaic French equivalent, *coffre-fort* meaning a safe. In German and Dutch the word *koffer* means a box or chest or travelling trunk, the Scandinavian variants being: *koffert* (Swedish) and *kuffert* (Norwegian and Danish). Originally the word was derived from the Greek name for basket. Its connection with a receptacle is ancient, and this is important because *coffering* is an architectural term for the repetition of square sunk panels in a ceiling.<sup>3</sup> It is, perhaps, reasonable to assume that the coffering method of

<sup>1</sup> A thirteenth-century chest in the possession of Mr. Robert Atkinson has got one of these ledges. See Plate II.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Cescinsky begins chapter i of volume ii of *Early English Furniture and Woodwork* with the words: 'The chest or coffer was a most important article of furniture. . . .'

<sup>3</sup> 'Coffer, a deep panel in a ceiling' (J. H. Parker's *Concise Glossary of Terms used in Grecian, Roman, Italian and Gothic Architecture*).

ceiling construction should have derived its name from chests which are panelled. The most primitive form of chest is a large block of wood, hollowed out. Early chests are slabbed, not panelled, the fronts, backs and sides each being made from single pieces of wood, framed into corner posts. The structural work on such chests is simple, and the elementary strength of the method employed is frequently supplemented by iron banding on the exterior.<sup>1</sup> If chests made in this way are described as 'coffers', ceilings with sunk, square panels should be called 'chested'. By strictly interpreting an architectural term we should describe panelled chests as coffers; but it is sometimes suggested that the term 'coffer' is applicable only to chests that were really timber safes or strong-boxes for the storing of treasure. Upon this interpretation of the term, now so widely accepted that it is more convenient to adopt it, we should only describe as coffers those chests built for strength and security by pre-Tudor woodworkers.

The cassone was an Italian elaboration of the chest, a shapely and ornate receptacle that was never made in England. Until the end of the fourteenth century English chests were of the simplest kind, occasionally embellished with a little chip carving, geometric roundels that had about them something faintly Saracenic, as if some fluttering and feeble echo of the taste of returning crusaders had been caught and perpetuated by the carver. Only when carved ornament grew bolder did its affinities with contemporary Gothic work be-

<sup>1</sup> The late twelfth-century chests in the Muniment Room at Westminster Abbey are well-preserved examples of this structural method. They are illustrated in volume i of the report of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *London (Westminster Abbey)*. Plate 21.

come so pronounced that the front of a late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century chest often resembled a series of blind church windows; tracery with the voids narrowed and reduced completely masking the surface.<sup>1</sup> Presently this carved tracery was pierced in the panelled fronts and doors of cupboards.<sup>2</sup>

The function of receptacles sometimes influenced the form of ornament that was carved upon them. The linen-fold device was an attempt to illustrate the folded fabrics within the chest or cupboard. The resulting pattern was so pleasing in its form, so subtle in the surface variation it afforded, that it was adopted for the embellishment not only of the fronts of chests and cupboards, but for the walls of rooms whenever they were panelled. The vine leaf motif, a flowing and boldly decorative form of ornament, was occasionally used, but in spite of such experiments with independent ornamental forms, the embellishment of early Tudor furniture never wholly lost its affinity with church wood-work.

During the sixteenth century, chests and stools which had hitherto provided the seats in most dwellings were supplemented by chairs. There had been chairs before this time, but they were in the nature of state chairs, rare and lordly things that seldom strained beneath the weight of a commoner. Generally these chairs were squat, throne-like boxes with rigid arms and high, straight backs. They were chairs that looked as though

<sup>1</sup> See the fourteenth-century example in Brancepeth Church, Northumberland, illustrated in *A History of Oak Furniture*, by Fred Roe, R.I. (1920), also a buttressed coffer of the same period in St. John's Hospital, Canterbury, illustrated in the same work.

<sup>2</sup> There are examples in the Victoria and Albert Museum of cupboards with such pierced fronts.

they had been designed to carry enormous weights. The enclosed front below the seat, the solid sides and the vertical back were usually filled with ornamental lines of tracery carved upon the panelled oak. At the upper corners of the back there would be finials, carved like spires (as in the Coronation Chair at Westminster Abbey), or else terminating in little castellated platforms to accommodate selections from the fauna of heraldry. The X-shaped chair which consisted of a frame of wood with a fabric seat and back represented exactly the same principle of construction as some of the modern chairs made of tubular steel.<sup>1</sup> There is a fourteenth-century X-shaped chair in the vestry of York Minster. Even in Tudor days these X-shaped chairs were rare. They might be found in the palace of a nobleman or some rich ecclesiastic like Cardinal Wolsey. In the early sixteenth century they were the elegant and comfortable representatives of the Italianate fashions that were soon to invade England. They no more represented the English craftsman's idea of chair-making than the classic façade of some composition by Baldassare Peruzzi or Giacomo Barozzi represented an English mason's idea of church-building.

The years of conflict that England suffered during the sixteenth century were illustrated by the troubled hesitations of the ornament used for enriching furniture. In the opening and middle years of that century two forms of civilisation were meeting but not merging. The old social order was deliberately broken up by the rulers of the state. Everything associated with mediaeval civilisation was lost or distorted. The problems in furniture design that were beginning to be explored by

<sup>1</sup> See Fig. 2, p. 3.

Gothic craftsmen were neglected or else loaded with alien and un-English mannerisms.

The chair was still left in a clumsy state of development. It was still only a box turned into a throne, a renitent, unfriendly shape. Even when the box disappeared and the chair became a stool with a back, its hard seat elevated upon legs, its deficiencies were those of its mediaeval progenitor. Although chairs in the sixteenth century were not so rare as in previous ages, they were uniformly uncomfortable, excepting only the luxuriant X-shaped models.

The ubiquitous chest which served as a seat and occasionally as a table, was by the middle of the Tudor century being restricted to its original use in well-appointed houses. Chairs (uncomfortable, but still chairs), stools and tables were becoming common. The standing cupboard, the buffet and the sideboard table, which was really a food-hutch raised above the floor level on four stout, straight legs, were all giving accommodation. Tables which began as crude benches on a large scale acquired some structural refinements. They were mostly of the trestle type, with a strong leg at either end, firmly set into a wide base and connected by horizontal members called stretchers. These two legs upheld bracketed cross-pieces on which the board rested. They were simple in design and very strong. (Fig. 7, page 39.) They were presently replaced by the four-legged table. Extra legs were added as the length increased, so that by the end of the sixteenth century six- and eight-legged tables were being made.

Beds had before the sixteenth century been designed upon the principle of making a room within a room. This principle controlled bed design until the nine-

teenth century. (The awful experience of Mr. Pickwick in the wrong double bedroom at the Great White Horse at Ipswich could only have occurred in an age of completely enclosed beds.) With their heavy framework and their concealing curtains such beds were separate sleeping chambers constructed of wood and fabric. The tester, or roof of the bed, was of panelled wood, so was the back, and the tester was supported in front by two posts. The curtains depended from the tester. All this woodwork provided an area for carving, and it overflowed with ornament as, year by year, the sparkling ripples of Italian fashion eroded English ideas of decoration.

In architecture and in furniture design, the opening years of the sixteenth century had promised a vigorous national style. Hampton Court, although a palace, showed how orderly and comfortable that style was. It was utterly lost in the age of confusion that for nearly one hundred years depressed furniture design with a load of vulgar and coarse decoration, and destroyed the simplicity of form and the dignity that were beginning to emerge from the crude strength and solidity of wood-working in the Middle Ages.

In the half-century between 1580 and 1630 English furniture included chests, court cupboards, sideboards, buffets, joint stools with turned legs and tables with turned legs. There were chairs with upholstered seats and backs and without arms, the small farthingale chairs of the early seventeenth century, designed originally to allow ladies who wore that expansive garment to sit down; and there were beds that looked like nightmare Roman temples, with the posts supporting the tester consisting of columns broken by melon bulbs,

hideously proportioned, in every way as vulgar as the worst efforts of mid-Victorian furniture makers. All this furniture suffered from ornament that came out of books. It was made to look rich. It succeeded in looking fidgety.

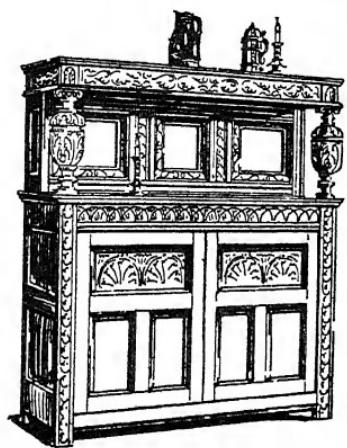
The whole Elizabethan scene is rather overcharged with new and exciting and ill-digested ideas. Only in literature and in the theatre and in music were clarity and order and greatness achieved, and works created for which posterity has reverence. If we examine the decoration and architecture and the shape of furniture produced at that time with critical eyes; if we put away the thought that such things formed the setting for those wild and splendid gentlemen who did such magnificent things for the sake of English trade overseas and whose manners were so exquisite, and whose accomplishments were so strikingly various; if we forget about the virile and stimulating life that was lived against this clumsy background and look only at the constituents of the background, then we must condemn them as unwieldy and monstrously ugly. There were a few examples of agreeably decorated furniture. There was some fine, clean carving. But such lucid exceptions only occurred when craftsmen were not harnessed to the imported fashions of the Continent.

All the pieces of furniture that had come into use by the end of the sixteenth century developed and changed during the seventeenth century. Cupboards were used more extensively. The terms court-cupboard and buffet should be defined. The court-cupboard was a tall piece of furniture with a big cupboard in the lower part of it and in the upper part smaller cupboards, set back so that there was a ledge in front of them. The top

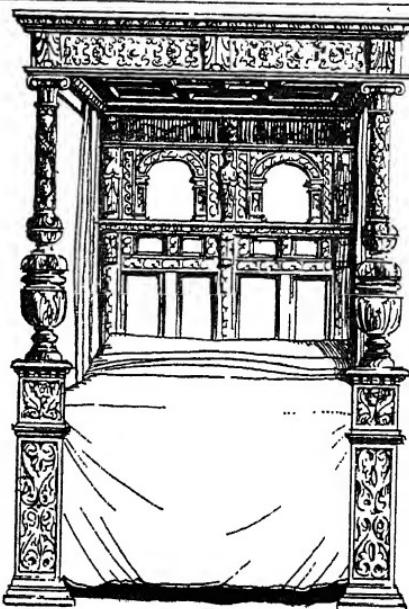
of this smaller set projected like a roof, and was supported by two turned columns, often of the melon bulb pattern. (Fig. 11, page 49, also Plate V.) The buffet or sideboard consisted of three open shelves which were supported by columns in front and by columns or flat vertical members behind. (Fig. 13, page 49.)

The chest was continuing its evolution, and early in the seventeenth century a new species was created. The base of the chest grew deeper, and in that base a couple of drawers were fitted and the result was called a mule chest. That was the beginning of the chest's gradual elevation from seat level to higher altitudes, which culminated in the eighteenth-century tallboy or double chest. Later in the seventeenth century chests staggered up on to stands, variously proportioned and often mere excuses for decoration. The combination of the chest and cupboard was more satisfying to the utilitarian instincts of the English, and this form of chest was made in the Puritan period, when arid utility engaged the minds of the pious hooligans who were busy eliminating comfort, innocent amusement, Christmas customs, Charles I, and anything else that happened to be ornamental.

During the first forty years of the seventeenth century there was no modification in the bald discomfort of chairs. Leather seats and backs were introduced during the Commonwealth, but no study was given to the general shape of the chair which would have increased its agreeableness. The X-shaped types were perpetuated and they developed rich depths of comfort, becoming broader, with deeply cushioned seats, and with the wooden frame covered completely with fabric. Tasselled fringes hung down from the seat and from the



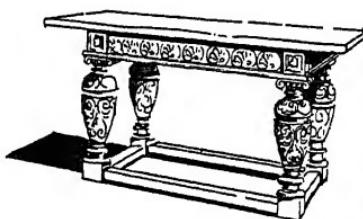
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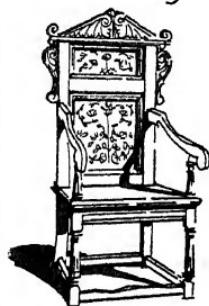
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FIG. 11. Oak court cupboard, c. 1620.

FIG. 12. Oak bed, late XVIth century.

FIG. 13. Oak sideboard or buffet, late XVIth or early XVIIth century.

FIG. 14. Oak table, c. 1630-40.

FIG. 15. Oak chair, with inlaid panels in the back and carved cresting, c. 1600.

FIG. 16. Oak joint stool, c. 1570.

FIGS. 17, 18. Early XVIIth-century stool covered in velvet, and farthingale chair.



arms; gilded nails secured the fabric to the frame; but such chairs were still rare. An interesting example of one which up to a few years ago was preserved in the Cottage Hospital at Moreton-in-the-Marsh is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>1</sup> It is the chair in which Charles I sat during his trial. It is a regal chair, but it does not indicate any structural advance, any increased knowledge of chair-making; it is fundamentally the same as the fourteenth-century chair in the vestry of York Minster, except that the seat and back are more rigid and are not slung from the frame. This chair suggests the conscious preservation of a structural form for the sake of decorative effect because its rigid seat and back make no use of the structural bones of the chair. The X-shaped framing below is without significance in this early Stuart example. It could just as well have four independent legs. This chair represents the last phase of the X-shape type in England until we come to certain modern steel types in which the X-shaped framing again fulfils a structural need.

Chairs that derived their decoration from elaborate upholstery, from rich fabrics and braiding, and intricately knotted fringes were swept away some years before Charles I—himself a survival of a luxurious period—was compelled to sit in the one that has just been described to endure the tedium of his trial. The Puritans repressed luxury, and insisted upon plainness and stern statements of utility. Velvets, fine silks and brocades, elaborate carving and inlaid ornament, and all the foreign tricks that had been lifted from those

<sup>1</sup> A drawing of it appears in Frederick Litchfields' *History of Furniture*, chap. iv, and a photograph of it in its glass case at the Moreton Hospital, on p. 53 of *Time, Taste and Furniture*. There are similar chairs in Knole.

most suggestive plates of Mynheer Jean Vredeman Frison were banished.<sup>1</sup> Of all the misplaced architectural motifs that had helped to destroy good proportion in furniture, only the arcaded panel remained. Arcading was a form of ornament which reproduced in flat relief arches, singly or in series, on panels and friezes, each panel being filled in the upper part by an arch springing from crudely fluted pilasters. All the other architectural loans to furniture making were repudiated. No longer did Ionic and Doric columns unhappily accommodate themselves with dropsical emphasis to the demands of heavy table-legs and bed-posts. There was a revival of the type of ornament that was derived naturally from the skill of the woodworker and the turner. Running patterns and ornamental patches were punched into the surface of wood. There was a great increase of ability in turning. The legs of chairs and tables were turned in baluster forms, and presently a number of decorative turnings were evolved, such as a succession of bobbins, and in time the highly ornamental barley sugar twist was invented. A significant and perhaps unfortunate development took place during this period of comparative abstention from ornament, and it grew out of the increased facility for decorative turning. Balusters and strips of bobbin turning were split centrally, and the flat side applied to a surface, to the framework of a chest or to a panel.<sup>2</sup> Hitherto ornament had been worked by a carver on some solid, structural member of the piece of furniture. Panel mouldings were 'struck' and worked on the edges of the styles and rails of the framework.

<sup>1</sup> See p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Split turning in stone was used in the late sixteenth century.

Even in the late sixteenth century, inlaid marquetry was used for friezes and panels, such woods as holly and sycamore being inserted in an oak ground; all rather crude, and never developing elaborations or higher standards of workmanship until at least a century later.<sup>1</sup>

Applied ornament was a new practice, and although it was used with restraint in the mid-seventeenth century, it was the precedent for many infelicitous experiments which disfigured the work of later periods and which reached the zenith of ineptitude in pre-war machine-made Jacobean furniture, or 'Jaco' as it is called in the furniture trade. At the end of the early Stuart period when Court taste was ceasing to influence design, the Englishman's house was beginning to be very comfortable. It was not overcrowded; it was light, with tall windows ascending to the ceilings of the rooms; it was probably draughty and rather cold, but it had chairs and tables and cupboards, chests, comfortable beds and decorative textiles on some of the walls. The chairs were becoming more humanised in shape although they were still rigid. Hard, wooden seats were generally used for chairs, stools and settles. There would probably be more stools than chairs in any house, the 'joyned' stool or joint stool being a common article of furniture. Very strong and well made were these little stools, and their framing was occasionally subjected to violent tests, particularly in inns when they were flung about during drunken brawls. All this furni-

<sup>1</sup> Some elaborate chests, with inlaid representations of the Palace of None-such, were occasionally found in England in the late sixteenth century, but it is unlikely that they were of English workmanship; they have a Flemish flavour about them.

ture was made of oak. All of it had to stand wear and tear of a kind unknown in periods that are less virile in character. Those heavy topped oak tables, the long boards supported on six bulbous legs, were framed, and braced and wrought to cope with orgies, thunderous expressions of good-fellowship and clamorous outbursts of disapproval. Only the strongest furniture could have survived the vehement social graces of that time.

Oak was no longer tortured into fanciful shapes after the Puritans really began to control England. Released from the necessity of mastering forms that were still unfamiliar in spite of the vivid pictorial directions in works on classic ornament and architecture, the English craftsmen became inventive. New forms of furniture arrived. There was the gate-legged table: a most ingenious mechanical device of extreme simplicity and foreshadowing many latter-day solutions of the economical use of space. The mule chest has already been described, but that was the forerunner of the tallboy which in the eighteenth century was to provide double the accommodation of an ordinary chest without making any extra demand upon floor area. Economies of space and the convenient disposition of furniture in rooms were matters that received a lot of inventive attention everywhere in the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Dual-purpose furniture was also made, notably the table-chair, which was an arm-chair with a circular back, this back being hinged so that it could swing over and assume a hori-

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Oliver P. Bernard has described (in the *Architectural Review*, vol. lxxii, No. 433, December 1932, pp. 285-7) a one-roomed flat of 1684, designed by Cornelius Meyer, a Dutch engineer, who included this and other examples of his ingenuity in a volume entitled *L'arte di restituire Roma: la tralasciata navigazione del suo Tevere*, which he dedicated to Pope Innocent XI.

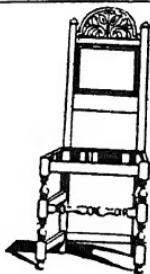
zontal position on the arms, becoming thereby a small circular table. In his travels John Evelyn was meeting various pieces of foreign ingenuity in furniture-making. He speaks of '... a chayre to sleepe in with the leggs stretcht out' which can 'draw out longer or shorter' (10th November 1644). Also '... a whimsical chayre, which folded into so many varieties as to turn into a bed, a bolster, a table, or a couch' (29th November 1644).

The pre-Renaissance tradition in woodwork was now fairly re-established. It kept its hold on the country for a long time. It was that tradition, surviving in village workshops, which was responsible—even in the eighteenth century—for the invention of simple 'functional' types of furniture, such as the Windsor Chair, types which only faintly reflected the ideas and forms that were ruling the centres of the contemporary mode.

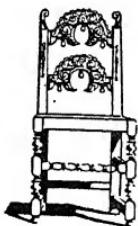
Even during the Commonwealth, the background of furniture was changing. It was becoming more orderly, losing its congestions of ornament, showing in every line and detail the increasing knowledge of architectural proportion, the increasing respect paid by architects to Vitruvian rules. Inigo Jones, that great and tragic father of English architecture, had by the lucidity of his own interpretation of classic architecture abolished the discords that had made the houses and rooms of the early seventeenth century so restless and so pretentiously trivial. Had he lived in a happier period he might have anticipated the direction of furniture design by the architectural profession that came about in the eighteenth century. In his day he was a modernist: that is to say, that even with the backing of royal patronage he had to endure the futile criticism of the architecturally uneducated, the opposition of the com-

mon mind, and the abuse of jealous and stupid people who feared what they could not understand. His historic quarrel with Ben Jonson arose from Jonson's inability to see that Jones was more than a sort of superior scene-shifter for the court masques, and in that prolonged and bitter difference Ben Jonson, genius though he was, proved that he was before all other things a narrow professional literary man. When Jones gathered up all the tangled odds and ends of Italianate fashions, and with profound scholarship and noble imagination wove the most majestic forms, when he disclosed to a world that was fumbling architecturally the lucid harmonies of the Banqueting Hall, that tiny section of the great Palace of Whitehall that was never built, he roused and shocked and stimulated and exalted the ideas of that world. His later professional life was addressed to the disheartening battle for good design against the dread English Trinity: Ignorance, Indolence and Individualism. No good architect has since been absolved from that unending warfare.

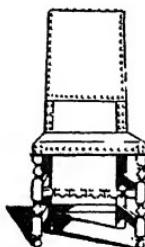
The grandeur of proportion that followed the new understanding of architecture in the middle years of the seventeenth century was matched by the dignity of oak furniture to which national character was restored. Every piece of that furniture was a downright statement of structural fact. It was plain English, with here and there a jest, a light touch of relaxation, the irrepressible humour of the race that had its lively way in wood under a humourless regime, as blithely as it has had its way in other matters ever since. Those touches of ornament on chair-backs and table-legs might have shown the Puritan governors of the land how impossible it was to drive out from English minds a love of enjoyment and a warm



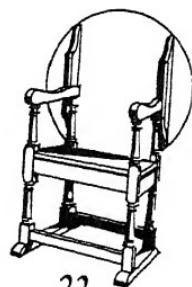
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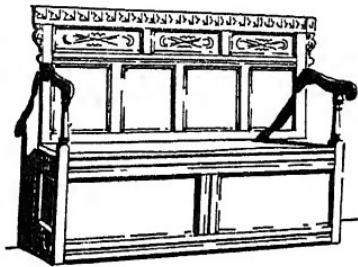
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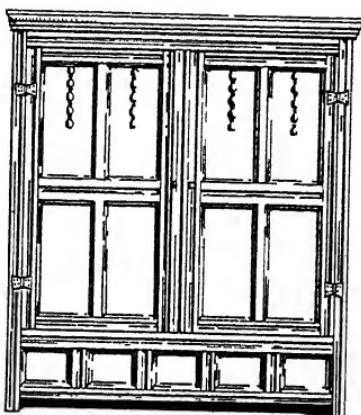
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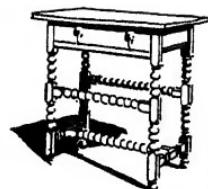
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FIG. 19. Oak "Lancashire" chair, c. 1650.

FIG. 20. Oak "Yorkshire" chair, c. 1660.

FIG. 21. Leather-covered oak chair, c. 1650.

FIG. 22. Oak table-chair, c. 1655.

FIGS. 23, 24. Oak settle and cupboard, c. 1650.

FIG. 25. Walnut mirror, c. 1680, and oak chest with drawers.

FIGS. 26, 27. Oak gate-leg table and yewtree table, c. 1660.



regard for the small and pleasant things of the world; how impossible it was to concentrate the thoughts of every subject in that queer repressive English republic upon the rewards of a glum Nonconformist paradise. Soldiers and saints made an art-proof combination. Men of education and alert intelligence gave up discussing such dangerous subjects as politics and religion; they devoted their leisure to scientific enquiry and to the study of the arts, consoled by the hope that the dismal tyranny they suffered was only a passing madness. Martin Parker, writing in the blackest time of that savage dictatorship, must have reflected the urgent desire of every cultivated mind in this ballad:

Though for a time we see Whitehall  
With cobwebs hanging on the wall,  
Instead of silk and silver brave  
Which formerly it used to have,  
With rich perfumes in every room,  
Delightful to that princely train,  
Which again you shall see when the time it shall be  
When the King enjoys his own again.

The Puritans had a sobering and steadyng effect upon the character of furniture. Before 1630 design had been getting badly out of hand. For the next thirty years it shed all manner of shoddy accumulations of ornament, and by the time Charles II was restored to the throne, furniture was again wholly national and functional, as it had been at the opening of the sixteenth century, before the foreign influences of the Renaissance were imposed upon it. But in 1660 there was a far greater variety of furniture, and in chair design particularly the inventive advance had been enormous. Chairs were now *uie* holstered in leather, with stuffed seats and backs, st

## ENGLISH FURNITURE

sometimes leather was slung from the frames, forming a yielding and most unpuritanically comfortable seat. English woodworkers having clarified their minds and regained control over the form of furniture, were now ready to be influenced by a fresh set of foreign ideas. Charles II did not disappoint them.

## CHAPTER IV

### FURNITURE DESIGN UNDER FASHION 1660-1730

MUCH could be written about the influence of courtesans upon furniture design. The phases of elaboration in furnishing that have generally followed the domination of a European king by a mistress or series of mistresses, might suggest that ostentation is symptomatic of moral laxity; but actually there may be an economic explanation of the phenomenon. 'Put not your trust in Princes' favours' has been one of the guiding principles of beautiful and accomplished women who have seriously studied the exploitation of a monarch, while 'get what you can while the getting is good' is a policy that naturally arises from a serious consideration of the transitory nature of their hold upon the royal affections. Everything, therefore, that could bear costly and expensive decoration upon its surface was demanded by the uncrowned queens of Europe. Cabinets inlaid and embossed with silver and gold. Exquisite carving, heavily gilded. Plate. Jewels of course. Rich fabrics. Everything that sparkled and glittered and was loaded down with the evidence of wealth appealed to the taste of people who were collecting precious material as fast as they could, material which could easily be turned into money; gauds that would also impress the whole world with the fact that His Gracious Majesty

was really taking the most energetic delight in honouring the recipient.<sup>1</sup>

Charles II encouraged many foreign fashions both in furniture design and in ornament. His mistresses encouraged elaboration. Within twenty years of the Restoration, all the clean, austere furniture forms that had emerged during the Puritan period had disappeared from the towns and the fashionable houses. They survived in the country. But in London new forms multiplied and they were embellished with everything that could symbolise the lascivious preoccupations of Court taste. It was in such malleable branches of design as furniture-making that Carolean ideas found their most luxurious expression.

In architecture a fine orderliness was emerging and Inigo Jones's successor, Sir Christopher Wren, was completing the education of the English in architectural design. It was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that the form of furniture began to reflect in wood the nobility that was being achieved in stone. Before that harmony was attained there was a florid interval during which furniture was made which had something of the stiffness of line, something of the sturdy uprightness that were common in Puritan times. But those stern, staunch frames were bedecked in a manner which created a strange unseemliness of

<sup>1</sup> See Evelyn's description of the dressing-room of the Duchess of Portsmouth (4th October 1683): 'Then for Japan cabinets, screens, pendule clocks, great vases of wrought plate, tables, stands, chimney furniture, sconces, branches, braseras, &c. all of massive silver, and out of number....' But Charles did not stop at gifts of expensive furniture. He granted the famous palace of Nonesuch to George, Lord Grandison, and Henry Brouncker in trust for Barbara Palmer, Duchess of Cleveland, who, of course, had it pulled down.

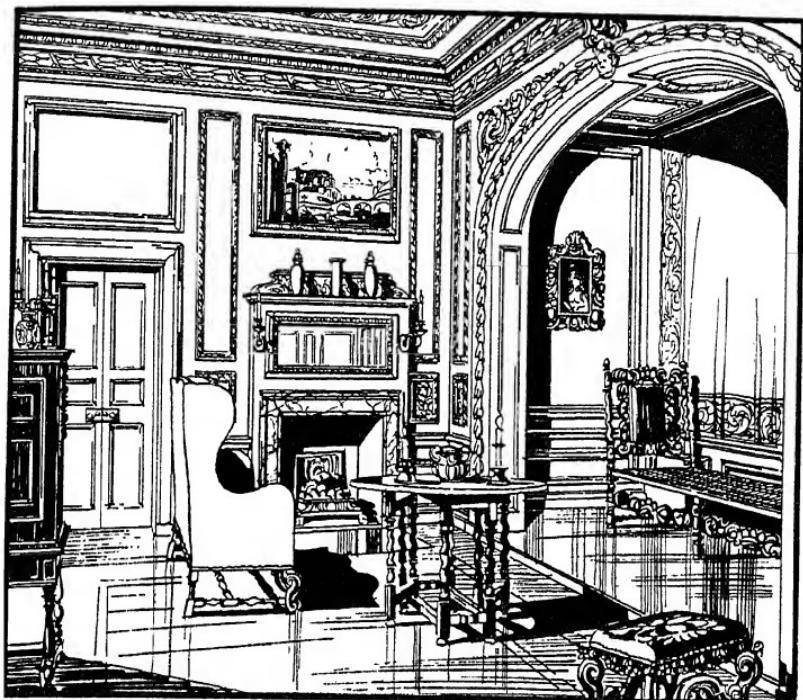


FIG. 28. A Charles II interior showing a day-bed with a cane seat and an elaborately carved under-frame and back. There is a wing settee with scroll front legs which begin to suggest the cabriole form which developed a quarter of a century later. The setting of this furniture shows the growing influence of architectural design although it had not yet affected the form of furniture.



effect, as though a Presbyterian elder had put on fancy dress.

Chairs kept a fine purity of form, but the simple turning and tentative decoration of the sixteen-forties and fifties became more emphatic. Chair-legs and the vertical members of the back were now linked with elaborately carved horizontal framing. The stretchers that tied the legs together were either twisted with the barley-sugar twist or carved with various decorative motifs. (These heavy twists would be carved by country craftsmen, not turned: turning on the legs of tables and cabinet-stands would taper delicately from the foot upwards. See Plates VII and VIII, which show this tapering, and Plate VI, which shows the hand-carved barley-sugar twist.) The chair-seat would be filled with a yielding net of elegantly interlaced cane-work. The back would be partly filled with the same material, and this cane panel would be flanked by carved uprights, surmounted by a crested top rail. This cresting was frequently composed of amorini, those voluptuously chubby little cupids that fluttered about in pairs all over the furniture of this period.

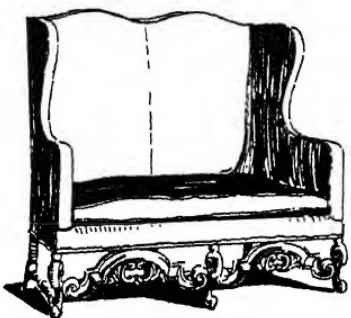
Single chairs and armchairs were becoming more ornate. Oak was discarded by the fashionable makers, and walnut was used, a sleek, golden brown wood that gave to the form of chairs and tables greater riches of colour and marking than had hitherto been known.

Comfort was now being seriously studied, and the apparatus of comfort was always related to the source of heat in rooms. Visible heat has guided all English ideas on comfort, so that they are now, even in this age of central heating and electricity, still focussed upon the fireplace. The business of conserving the heat of a fire-

side and providing protection from draughts has been taken very seriously by every maker of furniture in England. When the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries refers to the comfort of homes and inns, the chimney-corner, the fireside circle, and the generous depth of inn kitchen fireplaces, flanked by settles, are described in affectionate detail. The high-backed settle was probably the earliest attempt to secure for those who were warming their feet by the fire some guarantee of immunity from partial freezing; for draughts have apparently always plagued the English house, and chill winds have whistled under doors and through window-frames for centuries. The high-backed settle was hard: it was a severe seat, un cushioned, but with a slight acknowledgement of the human form in the gentle rake of the back, which rose high above the head-level of those leaning against it. The seats in the third-class compartments of certain railways still preserve the primitive features of the early settle in their archaic purity. The flanking settles of a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century inn or parlour fireplace extended like wings, concentrating the heat, and their ends were partially enclosed by shaped draught-excluders. It was this form of ear-protecting device that was adopted by the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century furniture-makers for that great triumph of comfort, the wing chair.

This chair, the grandfather, and the progenitor of everything that claims to be an easy-chair, was suited to the English temperament.<sup>1</sup> It gave a touch of individual isolation even in the family circle: it was a three-sided

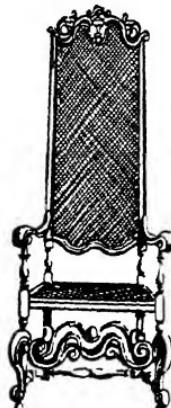
<sup>1</sup> Some early seventeenth-century easy-chairs and settees at Holyrood Palace are illustrated in Frederick Litchfield's *History of Furniture*, chap. iv.



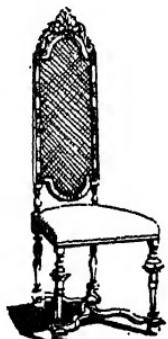
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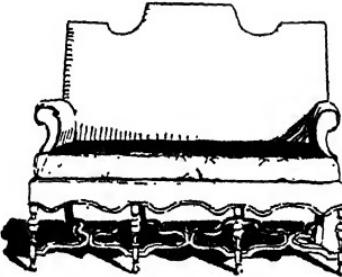
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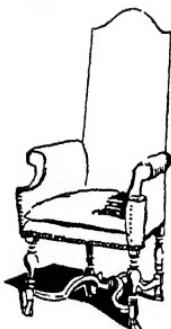
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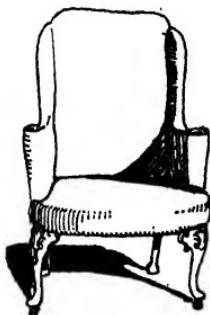
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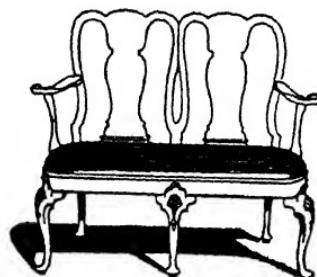
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FIG. 29. Settee with walnut frame covered in velvet, c. 1685-90.

FIG. 30. Walnut single chair with cane seat, c. 1670.

FIGS. 31, 32, 33, 34. Walnut chairs and settee, c. 1690.

FIG. 35. Walnut easy-chair covered in needlework, early XVIIth century.

FIGS. 36, 37. Walnut settee and chair, c. 1710.



receptacle for the body, and, if anybody had thought of it, might have given rise to a saying complementary to 'an Englishman's house is his castle', so that we could have said, 'an Englishman's chair is his cabin'. It was. You retired into your chair, and only extended into the outer world the stem of your long clay pipe and your legs from the knees downward. You retired to sit upright, for the chair-backs were straight although upholstered.

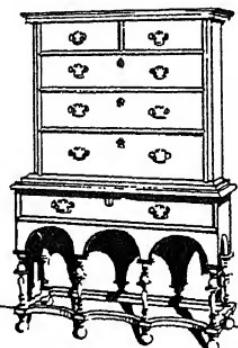
In the forty years between 1660 and 1700 the settle underwent a change. Its form was retained, but its high back and its arms were swaddled with upholstery, the supporting framework of its long seat developed an ornamental character, the knees of the legs bent gently in scrolls, an anticipation of the true sweeping cabriole curve that was to come later. The stretchers that linked the legs in front, arched upwards to meet the under-frame of the seat; and this combination of carved walnut and rich brocade or velvet became the high-backed settee, companion to the wing chair, another competent barrier to draughts. A more compact and intimate invention was the love-seat; an appropriate product of Charles II's reign. It was a small upholstered settee, designed to accommodate two people sitting side by side. There was also the day-bed, a long seat with an adjustable head which could be lowered so that it became an extension of the seat, or could be raised to facilitate reclining. Both seat and head were usually of cane-work. The framework would have extravagantly carved arched stretchers, and scroll legs, and the head would be framed with twisted or turned vertical uprights with carved cresting at the top. (Fig. 28, page 63.)

Chair-makers were borrowing ideas from Spain and from Portugal. Cabinet-makers were borrowing ideas from Holland and from China. Only in the country was there a true national expression of design, and various localities made characteristic types of furniture. For example, the Yorkshire chair was a piece of Puritan design, which had turned legs and an open back with carved crescent-shaped cross rails linking the vertical members of the back. (Fig. 20, page 57.) The Lancashire chair, another local type, was similar in some respects to the Yorkshire chair, but instead of having an open back it had a solid panel with a semicircle of carved cresting at the top of it. Sometimes that solid panel would be carved in low relief. (Fig. 19, page 57.) A few other localities produced chair types.

The impress of the English craftsman's gift for making a comely statement of fitness was beginning to fade from furniture made in the towns. Mr. Pepys was noting examples of rich and unusual furnishing, and as early as 1660 (19th October) he records the brave setting he had ordered for his own dining-room furniture: 'This morning my dining-room was finished with green serge hanging and gilt leather, which is very handsome'. On 29th May 1664 he describes the house of Mr. Povy: 'And in a word, methinks, for his perspective in the little closet; his room floored above with woods of several colours, like but above the best cabinet-work I ever saw; his grotto and vault, with his bottles of wine, and a well therein to keep them cool; his furniture of all sorts; his bath at the top of the house, good pictures, and his manner of eating and drinking; do surpass all that ever I did see of one man in all my life'. Evelyn also refers to Mr. Povey's 'elegant house in



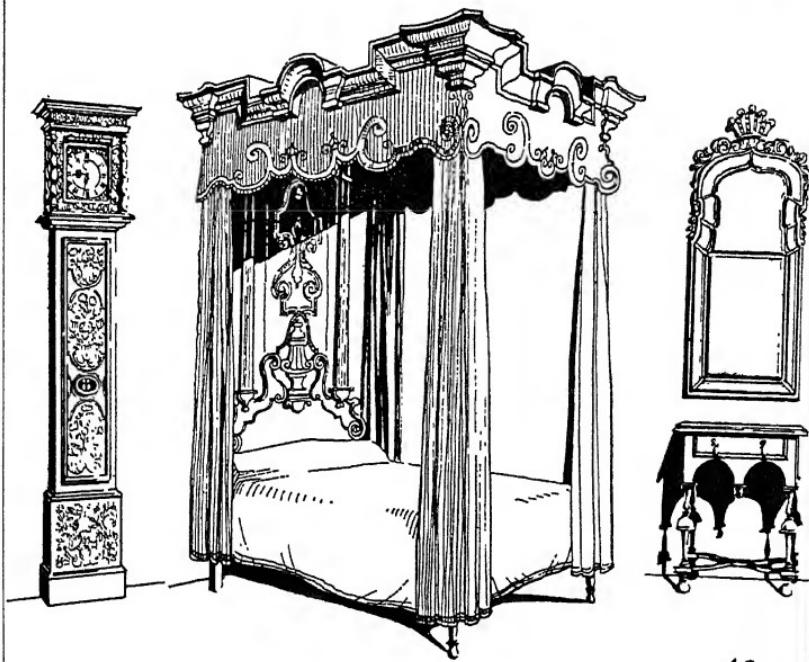
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FIG. 38. William and Mary walnut marqueterie cabinet.

FIG. 39. Walnut chest on stand, c. 1690.

FIG. 40. Black lacquer cabinet on carved and gilded wood stand, c. 1675-80.  
FIGS. 41, 42. Walnut marqueterie long-case clock, and bed completely covered in fabric. Late XVIIth century.

FIG. 43. Walnut table, c. 1695. Gilt mirror, c. 1700.



Lincoln's-inn-fields' and was also impressed with 'the inlaying of his closet' (1st July 1664).

Furnishing was acquiring conscious grandeur, and again the craftsman and his ideas were submerged. This time, however, patronage was educated. Fashion was not being flaunted and dominated by a new rich class, a mercantile aristocracy which could not comprehend elegance or good proportion. The outrages upon form that had characterised the previous Stuart period were not repeated. Now fashion was under the control of men of taste, men who had cultivated their appreciation of beautiful things in Italy and France, versatile gentlemen who were not ashamed of their knowledge of architecture and painting and music, for in those days it was not considered a disadvantage to be a cultivated and intelligent person. No fool had invented the term 'highbrow' to excuse his own inferiority. Sometimes the regard for fine surroundings went to a man's head, and Charles Cotton has some fun at the expense of this type of affliction in his *Epigram de Mons. Maynard*:

Anthony feigns him Sick of late,  
Only to shew how he at home,  
Lies in a Princely Bed of State,  
And in a nobly furnish'd Room  
Adorned with pictures of Vandike's,  
A pair of Chrystal Candlesticks,  
Rich Carpets, Quilts, the Devil, and all:  
Then you, his careful Friends if ever  
You wish to cure him of his Fever,  
Go lodge him in the Hospital.

But all these gentlemen and ladies who surrounded themselves with beautiful things had an eye for good design. Their furniture was ornate; but it was never stupidly ornate. Its decoration was never allowed to

destroy its structural good sense. Chairs remained chairs; they were not, as French craftsmen made them later, mere excuses for ornamentation, so that an article that was primarily a seat became a rococo extravaganza upon which it was almost impossible to sit. At no period of English furniture-making did design degenerate in this way, and florid though it might be, the furniture of the Carolean period was not without dignity and beauty.

There were great increases in convenience. Mirrors were no longer rare and exceptional articles; now their steel-coloured glass everywhere provided dark pools of reflection, set in wide walnut frames. Later in the seventeenth century mirrors were edged with bands of blue glass. Clocks were also becoming commoner. Little brass clocks, lantern, bedpost or bird-cage as they were called, had been introduced in the middle of the seventeenth century. And from these the wooden, hooded type was derived, a rather clumsy compromise that gave place to the long-case 'grandfather' clock. The early lantern clocks had domed bells with decorative finials surmounting their brass cases, and they sat on a bracket on the wall, with their weights depending from chains or cords. Before the Restoration the pendulum was introduced, and these hanging clocks were provided with wooden cases and presently the pendulum was also enclosed in wood so that the whole interior mechanism was protected by a timber integument, and the long-case 'grandfather' clock was in being.

Chests were now raised on legs and consisted of two, three or four sets of drawers, the drawer fronts being elaborately moulded, and the legs of the stand twisted. Decorative lacquer cabinets were imported from China and were provided with intricately carved stands which

were gilded or silvered. The rudimentary cabriole form was employed for the legs of these stands; the inevitable amorini lurked in their leafy scrolls, and two totally dissimilar forms of decoration were often appropriately united by that all-saving sense of proportion which was the happy possession of the Caroleans. Numbers of these lacquer cabinets were imported, and in Holland the wooden carcases of chests, bureaux and tables were shipped to the East where they were lacquered and decorated by Chinese artists and returned to Europe. Attempts to imitate Chinese lacquer were made both on the Continent and in England, generally with unsatisfactory results, for a depressing muddiness frequently afflicted the colour, and the decoration itself was often ill-placed, and lacked the spirit and vigour and skill of Chinese decorators.

When the Stuart period ended in the revolution of 1688, Dutch taste became powerful once again, and with it came the extensive introduction of marquetry furniture. A good definition of marquetry is given in H. P. Shapland's *Practical Decoration of Furniture*:<sup>1</sup> 'Strictly speaking, inlaid work should be regarded as the technique which consists of forming slight sinkings of an eighth or quarter of an inch deep in the solid wood, and then filling the hollows so made with woods of a different colour, cut to fit them. Marqueterie is a later development and is closely bound up with veneering. In marqueterie the ornament is first cut into a thin sheet of wood or veneer and subsequently the veneer and ornament, as one sheet, are applied to the surface of the wood.' It was an entirely foreign importation. Veneered marqueterie, as Mr. R. W. Symonds points out, 'had

<sup>1</sup> Vol. i, Section 2, p. 17.

no period of evolution or transition in England; it was a Dutch craft brought into this country in a fully developed state'.<sup>1</sup>

The William and Mary period was one of transition. The profusion of late Stuart decoration disappeared and was replaced by surface decoration that illustrated a growing sense of texture. Such appreciation of texture had never before been apparent in English furniture-making. All the early inlaid work showed a disregard for richness and variety of surface. It was really only the crude insertion of different materials into a wooden base, and from Elizabethan times until the end of the Carolean period, ebony, ivory, mother-of-pearl, holly, sycamore and various other decorative materials were thrust into receptive hollows in the fronts of chests. It was only when the delicate and beautiful craft of veneering was practised in England that inlaid work acquired such refinements as oyster-wood decoration, which is found on Carolean and William and Mary table-tops, chests and cabinets.<sup>2</sup> Possibly the taste for Oriental things increased the appreciation for decorative surfaces.

All the furniture of the William and Mary period has this common characteristic: it has a crisp, definite line, it has a sureness of touch in decoration, and it is beginning to suggest the dignity of contemporary architecture. The large state beds that were designed with their posts concealed by curtains, and enormous testers with deep valances depending from a decorative cornice, were wholly architectural in form, reflecting, with appropriate consideration for the nature of the materials

<sup>1</sup> R. W. Symonds, *Old English Walnut and Lacquer Furniture*, chap. v, p. 87.

<sup>2</sup> See Plate VIII.

of which they were composed, the harmonies that were taking shape in brick and stone all over England.<sup>1</sup> The most spectacular piece of rebuilding that had been done in the last third of the seventeenth century was in London after the Great Fire; and because of that great architectural effort, we are sometimes liable to forget how much rebuilding of towns was going on throughout England, sometimes under the direction of great London architects, sometimes demonstrating the fertile talent of some local genius, like Henry Bell of Lynn, who completely rebuilt that little jewel of a town, then a great port on the Wash, and to-day an exquisite example of architectural beauty, still lovely despite the savage mutilations occasioned by local ignorance during the last half-century. Town houses and country houses were being rebuilt or pulled down and started again from new foundations. There was little tenderness for existing structures. We find Evelyn in 1671 (17th October) commenting on a Ducal Palace to which he paid a visit: 'It is an old wretched building, and that part of it newly built of brick is very ill-understood, so as I was of opinion it had been much better to have demolished all, and set it up in a better place, than to proceed farther'. The year before, he mentions Lord Alington's house (20th August 1670): 'We went to dine at Lord Alington's, he had newly built a house of great cost, I believe little less than £20,000. His architect was Mr. Pratt.'

By the end of the seventeenth century upholstered furniture was comparatively common. The easy-chair, the settee, cane-backed single and elbow chairs, and upholstered stools all afforded soft and yielding seats

<sup>1</sup> See Fig. 42, p. 71.

supported on turned legs which were linked by decorative underframing. Cabinets and chests on stands in walnut, in lacquer, in marquetry, had gradually raised the level of accommodation. There were more pieces of furniture that stood at or above the level of a man's head, and the long-case grandfather clock towered above it. Tables had increased in variety and in mechanical efficiency. There were tables with drawers in them, single leaf and double leaf gate-leg tables, tables with draw-out tops and tables with all manner of decorative elaborations in the shape of veneered surfaces and marquetry and oyster-wood inlay.

The furniture made in the early eighteenth century showed that English makers had digested a fresh set of foreign ideas satisfactorily. In the period which is somewhat loosely described as Queen Anne, the blending of Dutch influences upon form and decoration with the English craftsman's honest approach to problems of bearing weight or providing accommodation resulted in furniture of noble proportions. Not only in the most fashionable form of furniture, but in the simplest things made in the country, did a new grasp of proportion and a new understanding of structural possibilities become apparent. In the country, for example, a chair was invented that was perfectly adjusted to the needs of the human body, and which employed with gracious economy the minimum amount of material needed for securing the maximum of stability and comfort. It was produced in strict, though unconscious accordance with the functionalist doctrines of modernists of the nineteen-thirties; and, like their chairs of metal tubing and fabric, it had an infinite capacity for taking strains. It was the Windsor or stick-back chair. The seat was shaped from

a clay mould that had accurately recorded a comfortable posture. The rake of the back was exactly suited to an attitude of ease. The legs were sturdy and reliable. The result was what is to-day called functionalism; but yesterday it was called fitness, and when the Windsor chair was first made it wasn't called anything in particular. The Windsor chair came out of country workshops and made no concessions to town fashions at first. In the course of its development it suggested them in a minor way. Hints were taken from Mr. Chippendale about the shaping of the top rail; fiddle splats were used in the back; cabriole legs were sometimes adopted: these were refinements that left the basic form unaffected, and the Windsor chairs that are turned out by thousands in High Wycombe to-day preserve the original character of the design, and although they are frequently gummed over with stains to give them an 'antique finish', their form is sufficiently comely for their discolouring to be a minor evil. Besides, with patience, it is possible to buy them 'in the white', before they have been treated so barbarously.

The Windsor chair followed the English tradition of woodworking. While it was evolving, the chair-makers of London were obediently bending their knees in deference to a Dutch fashion. The cabriole leg everywhere made courteous inclinations in English rooms. The swelling outward curve and the subtle concave inward bend below it, terminating in a shapely foot, which became popular in England round about 1700 as a chair-leg and table-leg form, was not invented in Holland though it gained most of its subtle refinements there. The scroll leg that was used on Carolean furniture was a rather unwieldy forerunner of the cabriole, and in

some of the elaborately carved stands for lacquer cabinets which were perhaps the most florid expressions of English baroque in the time of Charles II, there is again a hint of those counterbalancing curves, the heavy convex dominating above easing down into the slender concave curve below. There is in the Victoria and Albert Museum a lacquer chest on an exceptionally ornate stand. The four legs consist in the upper part of armless amorini gazing from the four corners of the stand with concentrated fatuity of expression. These little monsters have protuberant bellies and they are legless, becoming in the lower regions decorative mer-men as it were, their gross bodies being supported upon an inward curving stem of writhing acanthus leaves. This sort of thing was made about 1680. In Germany, where grossness in decoration, and in everything else, has always won approval, such turgescent, ill-proportioned rubbish was produced even in the eighteenth century. In a way, those bloated little cupids, so aggressively mutilated, anticipated the cabriole-leg form. But the idea of the cabriole leg is older than the seventeenth century. It can be seen in the exquisite bronze furniture in the Naples Museum that has been removed from Pompeii. It is derived from a conventional representation of an animal's leg. In that Roman furniture of the first and second centuries A.D. can be found some of the familiar features of the Queen Anne and Early Georgian periods.<sup>1</sup> The claw feet of tables and hoof feet also are there rendered in metal or stone. The progress of the paw foot for chairs may be traced in the *Encyclopaedia*

<sup>1</sup> This ancient furniture is the source of most of the ornamental borrowings of eighteenth and early nineteenth furniture designers. See pp. 21 and 124.

of *Furniture* from pre-Christian times in Egypt down to the French Empire furniture of Napoleon.<sup>1</sup>

The cabriole leg appeared not only on chairs and tables, but on stands, bureaux, stools and settees. It passed through a florid and uncertain transitional phase in the William and Mary period when the scroll form complicated its lines, and the free placing of chair feet was muddled by diagonal stretchers, or stretchers linking the front and back legs of a chair with another horizontal tie uniting them below the chair seat. It was not until the reign of Queen Anne that the cabriole leg in its pure form emerged and chair-makers dispensed with complexity of underframing and the stretcher disappeared, leaving a graceful, strong piece of furniture, bold and flowing in its lines, simple and strong in its construction, and endowed with an air of civilised graciousness that reflected increasing social graces.<sup>2</sup> Instead of the rather tortuous collection of framed cane-work, upright members, twisted bars and heavily carved cresting, that appeared in the backs of the late Stuart chairs, the simple chairs of the early eighteenth century had a broad, shapely central splat, linking the seat with the top rail, and two gently curving outer vertical members. (Fig. 37, page 67.)

Elaborate forms of furniture such as the bureau and bureau-bookcase and the knee-hole writing-desk were now made. They suggested the growing power archi-

<sup>1</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of Furniture*, by Dr. Hermann Schmitz of the Schloss Museum, Berlin. English translation, with an introduction by H. P. Shapland. London, 1926.

<sup>2</sup> There is a theory that stretchers were retained on chairs to enable people to keep their shoes from contact with the unsavoury rush-strewn floor. Floors, if the frankness of Mr. Pepys means anything, could not have been very pleasant, whether rushes were used or not, in the seventeenth century.

tectural forms had over the work of cabinet-makers. The bureau-bookcase would rise to the ceiling like some miniature building. Its upper part would be flanked with fluted pilasters surmounted by a cornice with a pediment above. There was real kinship between these great pieces of furniture and the buildings that Wren and Gibbs and Hawksmoor and Vanbrugh were designing. Men who had executed interior woodwork for the great architects of the time would be well drilled in proportion, and they would apply their knowledge when they returned to cabinet-making. Some of the long-case clocks recall by their proportion and their easy ascending lines the steeples of Wren's churches.<sup>1</sup> The affinity between architectural forms and furniture design everywhere became clearer as the eighteenth century advanced. Even on mirror frames the disposition of ornament and the proportions suggested architectural features. The architect provided the background for furniture, and inevitably furniture-makers were employed to produce things that were in harmony with the panelling and the chimney-pieces and the enriched cornices and door and window architraves that the architect designed.

In Charles II's reign Mr. Evelyn had discovered and Sir Christopher Wren had employed a carver with a great capacity for creating florid and beautifully fluent decoration, namely, Grinling Gibbons. He embellished furniture and mirror frames and architectural woodwork in churches, private houses and public buildings. Some of this carved decoration was beautiful, and when architects of the calibre of Sir Christopher Wren were in control of its placing it was wonderfully effective. But

<sup>1</sup> See Plate IX.

it was inclined to overpower furniture. Grinling Gibbons and the carvers who were inspired by his work did not reduce their ornament in scale sufficiently. They were called upon to decorate furniture. In the process they hatched a hideous brood of adipose cupids.

Early in the eighteenth century a material called gesso was employed. It was a composition used as a coating on the woodwork of tables, mirror frames, chairs and cabinets. It consisted of whitening and size, and successive layers of it built up on a wood ground could be carved into the most soft and flowing lines. The bulgings and thrustings of the Grinling Gibbons school was replaced by softer and more subtle ornament, and this delicate work was usually gilded. Although gesso was not used extensively until the reign of Queen Anne, it was actually introduced from Italy late in the seventeenth century.

For nearly two decades, from 1700 until 1720, English furniture again achieved rich and satisfying harmonies of form. All the foreign influences of the late Stuart and William and Mary periods had been assimilated; and once again English furniture was national, and therefore simple. It was dignified too, in a new and gracious way. But not for long did it retain its purity of form, its freedom from ornamental complexities. The early Georgian period began badly. Court taste drew its ideas from Germanic sources and the results were unfortunate. Also the influence of a royal mistress was painfully apparent. The Duchess of Kendal, who was honoured by the warm friendship of George I, distinguished herself by arranging for the dismissal of Sir Christopher Wren from his office of surveyor-general, possibly because he did not see eye to eye with

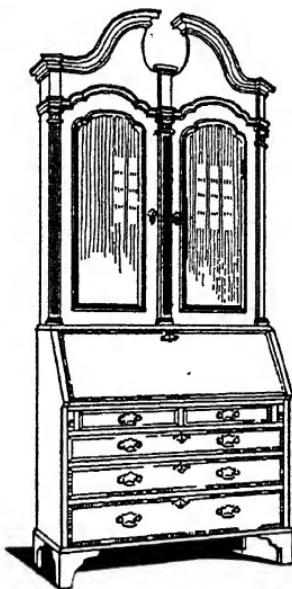
her about her schemes for the alteration of Hampton Court. George I dismissed Wren and conferred his office upon a brainless nonentity called Benson. This is an interesting illustration of the treatment almost invariably accorded to the great designers England produces; but even bad Court taste and the whims of ladies of pleasure could not destroy the influence of England's great architects or debilitate the educated taste of the nobility and gentry. The influence of the Court was not so deeply marked, and although Germanic ideas affected the embellishment of furniture between 1715 and 1730—which could be described as the early Georgian period—the researches and travels of such noblemen as the Earl of Burlington and his capacity for enlightened patronage were far more potent influences in the moulding of contemporary taste.

The Earl of Burlington published the designs of Inigo Jones and Palladio's drawings of the 'Antiquities of Rome'. He was the discoverer of William Kent, that decorator-architect who was one of the few people capable of designing extremely florid decoration that was still well proportioned. Pope in his epistle to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington, says:

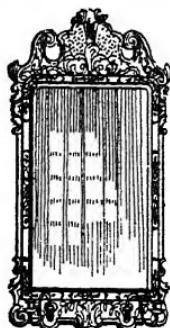
You shew us, Rome was glorious, not profuse,  
 And pompous buildings once were things of use.  
 Yet shall, my lord, your just, your noble rules  
 Fill half the land with imitating fools;  
 Whose random drawings from your sheets shall take,  
 And of one-beauty many blunders make;  
 Load some vain church with old theatic state,  
 Turn arcs of Triumph to a garden gate;  
 Reverse your ornaments, and hang them all  
 On some patch'd dog-hole eked with ends of wall,  
 Then clap four slices of pilaster on't,  
 That laced with bits of rustic makes a front;



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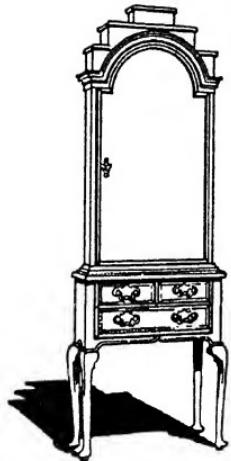
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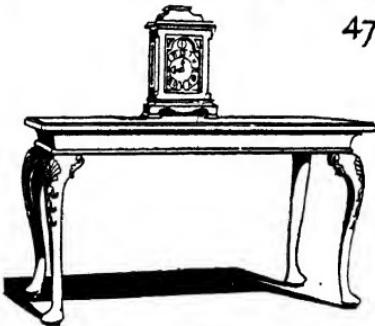
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FIG. 44. Black lacquer hanging corner cupboard, c. 1720.

FIG. 45. Walnut bureau cabinet, c. 1710.

Figs. 46, 47. Mirror with gilt gesso frame, bracket clock, and gilt gesso table, early XVIIItth century.

FIG. 48. Walnut cabinet with China display shelves, early XVIIItth century.

FIG. 49. Walnut table with marble top, c. 1720, and lacquer clock, c. 1735.



## FURNITURE DESIGN UNDER FASHION

Shall call the winds through long arcades to roar,  
Proud to catch cold at a Venetian door:  
Conscious they act a true Palladian part,  
And if they starve, they starve by rules of art.

Oft have you hinted to your brother peer,  
A certain truth which many buy too dear;  
Something there is more needful than expense,  
And something previous e'en to taste—'tis sense;  
Good sense, which only is the gift of Heaven,  
And, though no science, fairly worth the seven. . . .

How deeply ingrained in the English character is that respect for common sense. It has in time conquered every fashion, and after the beginning of the eighteenth century its power remained unbroken for one hundred and thirty years. Foreign influence, introduced once again by George I, had lost its power of completely upsetting English design and retarding its development. Everywhere at this time common sense was triumphant in the shaping of furniture. Everywhere cabinet-makers and chair-makers were studying architectural forms. A new and beautiful material had been introduced, mahogany, and it gradually replaced walnut as walnut replaced oak, except, of course, in country districts, where ash, beech, oak, yew, elm, cherry and apple wood were being used for furniture-making and providing simplified and most attractive editions of town-made things.

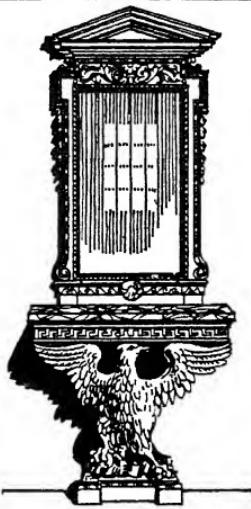
## CHAPTER V

### FURNITURE DESIGN UNDER THE ARCHITECTS, 1730-1830

C<sup>LIVE BELL</sup>, in his essay, *Civilisation*, observes that: 'The eighteenth century understood the importance of art; and its taste, though limited, was pure enough. In the minor and domestic arts it could discriminate finely; and the rich were willing to pay for beauty not in cash only but in time and trouble. The rich men and women of the eighteenth century cultivated their taste.' These sentences refer more specifically to French society of that period, but they are applicable also to England, where patronage had attained levels of education and intelligence that made it possible for the design of everything to be subjected to a critical scrutiny that was based upon a genuine perception of excellence in proportion and appropriateness in ornamentation. No architect was perplexed by the ignorant repetition of that Philistine phrase: 'I know what I like!' A gentleman knew when anything was well or ill proportioned; he understood that great system of horizontal and vertical rhythms and of surface variation and relief and adornment which the talented architects of the time had erected upon a sound Vitruvian foundation. He could discuss design with designers as a technical equal. And for the stimulation of his taste and for the



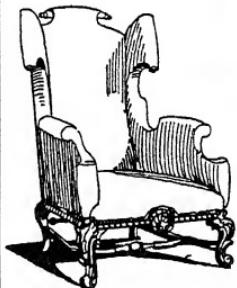
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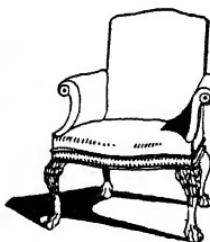
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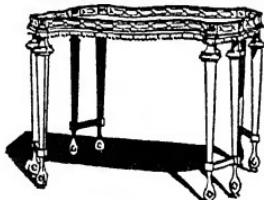
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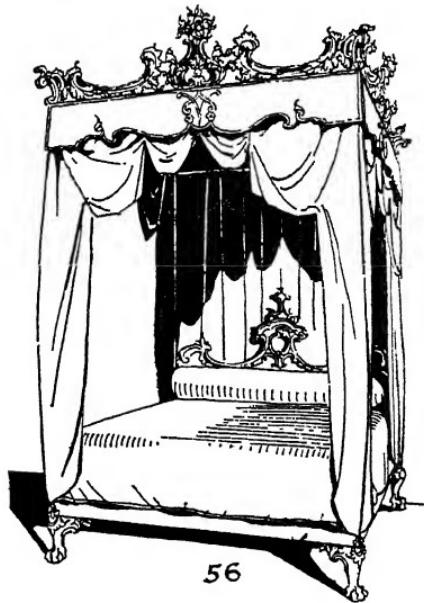
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FIG. 50. Walnut chair with gilt gesso enrichment, c. 1730.

FIG. 51. Gilt gesso easy-chair covered in velvet, c. 1740.

FIG. 52. Gilt mirror, c. 1740. Gilt console table, c. 1735.

FIG. 53. Early XVIIIth-century Windsor armchair.

FIG. 54. Armchair in mahogany with gilt enrichment, c. 1725.

FIGS. 55, 56. Mahogany centre table with fretted gallery, and Chippendale mahogany bed, c. 1745-60.



better information of the humbler people who ministered to it, architects, and presently furniture-makers, began to write books on design.

In 1739 William Jones, architect, published and sold at his house ('near the Chapple in King Street, Golden Square') a bound collection of copper-plate engravings entitled: *The Gentlemen's or Builders Companion, Containing Variety of usefull Designs for Doors, Gateways, Peers, Pavilions, Temples, Chimney-pieces, Slab Tables, Pier Glasses, or Tabernacle Frames, Ceiling Pieces, &c.* It was a slim book in which no type was used; even the title-page and contents-table were engraved on copper-plates; and the designs on those plates suggest that they were an architect's rough notes for the guidance of his own drawing-office rather than models for public consumption. There are a few undistinguished chimney-pieces, several mirror frames of good proportion, mostly with triangular pediments above friezes embellished with masks and swags. Six plates are given to marble-topped tables with legs and frames that are shaggy with carving, although the ornament is well placed. There is one grotesque table with the legs ending in hoof feet, with sad-looking, heavily whiskered masks just above them, whose beards stray down over the hooves. The various architectural details are in what Wren would have called 'a good Roman manner'; but the designs in this first handbook on ornament and furniture that was published in the eighteenth century are blameless rather than inspiring. Batty Langley, who was what might be called a writing as well as a practising architect, published *The Builder's and Workman's Treasury of Designs: or the Art of Drawing and Working The Ornamental Parts of Architecture.* 400 'grand

designs' on 186 copper-plates.<sup>1</sup> They included frets, tabernacle frames, chimney-pieces, stone tables and bookcases. The furniture plates are poor, except those devoted to bookcases designed to accord with the Tuscan, 'Dorick' and 'Ionick' orders of architecture. There is a regrettable dressing-table; a queer, complicated chest of drawers, of Dutch character; and various table frames, well-proportioned but overweighted with ornament and apeing contemporary French rococo types. The chimney-pieces and mantelpieces are superior to any of the furniture designs. Books on architectural design and ornament were also published in the middle years of the century by Abraham Swan, Thomas Johnson, Matthias Lock and James Paine.

Most of these technical books were thoroughly practical guides to the detail of classic ornament, and their authors set out rules for the correct proportions of the orders of architecture. They did not include any of the turbulent inventions of Jean Vredeman Frison. Their plates were intended to impart information to men who appreciated the orderliness of architecture and who were not content merely to copy ornament out of a book to allay the eagerness of their patrons for Continental fashions. Since the days when Frison's copy-book was popular, England had become sensitive to architectural propriety. Even the village cabinet-maker and joiner knew something about the five orders; and they wanted to know more, for patrons were more exacting. The squire's ideas were affected by the taste of the great nobleman who happened to be his neighbour and whose

<sup>1</sup> The publication date of the copy in the Library of the Royal Institute of British Architects is 1750, but many of the plates in it presumably had an earlier distribution, as they are dated 1739.

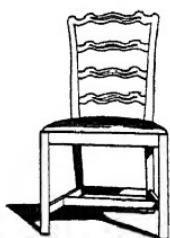
ancestral mansion was either being pulled down or extensively rebuilt in the Palladian manner. Pope's apprehension of the result of Palladio's drawings being published was partly justified. But those 'noble rules' Burlington revealed to England, while impelling a few 'imitating fools' to rush to their aesthetic doom, did strengthen the desire to comprehend the spirit of architectural design and to master its principles and then to achieve good proportion in all things, not only among architects, but among country builders and wood-workers, masons, joiners, smiths and cabinet-makers.

There was a willingness to accept architectural dictatorship in design; very different from the surly submission of resentful Tudor craftsmen to foreign ideas. Architects, like Isaac Ware, who published a book called *The Complete Body of Architecture*, extended that exacting control over the interior of the houses they designed that was to culminate in the work of the brothers Adam, and which survived in the early nineteenth century in the work of Thomas Hope. Isaac Ware's book was 'adorned with Plans and Elevations from Original Designs' and included 'some designs by Inigo Jones never before published'. The whole seemly background of contemporary life as the architect would have it was revealed in measured detail in 122 plates and 10 books. It well deserved the word 'complete', this fecund amplification of Vitruvius, for it was a fool-proof guide for everyone who worked in stone or brick or wood, and it dealt intimately with materials. There were chapters on timber, on oak and fir, when it should be felled, how it should be used, and a table of useful timber trees.<sup>1</sup> In the preface Ware shows that architects

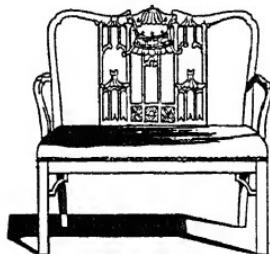
<sup>1</sup> Book I; chaps. xvi to xxi.

were accepting their wide responsibility for design, and incidentally condenses the English point of view about architecture into this sentence: 'Architecture has been celebrated as a noble science by many who have never regarded its benefits in common life: we have endeavoured to join these several parts of the subject, nor shall we fear to say that the art of building cannot be more grand than it is useful; nor its dignity a greater praise than its convenience'. Ware built Chesterfield House for Philip Earl of Chesterfield.

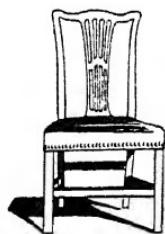
William Kent, under the patronage of the Earl of Burlington, not only designed buildings and interior decoration, but designed furniture of an ornate kind. It was an age of generous and emphatic but never inappropriate ornament. The cabriole legs of chairs and tables were lavishly adorned with gilded carving. Mouldings were enriched and gilded on the cornices and pediments of bureaux and cabinets. The edges of tables and desks were scalloped with nailing, heavily gilded. Fluting was gilded. The carved knees of chairs were gilded. Claw-and-ball and hoof feet were gilded. Rooms were warm with aureate high-lights. Orderly extravagance reigned: masks, shells, scrollwork, swags of fruit and flowers, trophies and cornucopia, festoons and ribbons and miles of egg-and-dart enrichment deployed in disciplined formations across every surface. The massing of ornament, its disposition and grouping were decided with a sureness of touch and a sureness of taste that had never before enlivened any phase of elaboration in English furnishing or interior decoration. Compare with this bland surety of judgement the decorative chaos of the Edwardian period. Mr. Roger Fry in *Vision and Design* describes in detail a room that



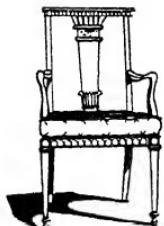
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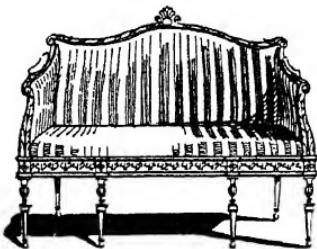
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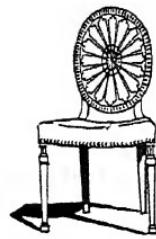
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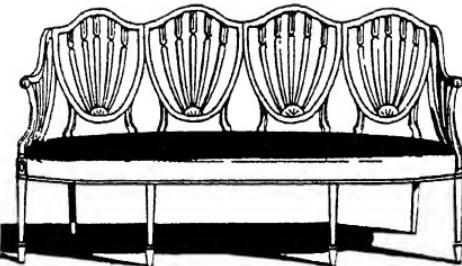
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Figs. 57, 58, 59. Ladderback chair, Chinese Chippendale settee and Chippendale type chair, c. 1740-60.

Figs. 60, 61, 62. Adam furniture: inlaid mahogany chair, silk-covered painted settee, and carved mahogany chair, c. 1760-90.

Figs. 63, 64, 65. Hepplewhite furniture: armchair with Prince of Wales feathers in back, settee in mahogany with four conjoined shield-shaped chair backs, and chair with heart-shaped back.



was quite as elaborate as any room in a wealthy gentleman's house in the second, third or fourth decade of the eighteenth century; it was a railway refreshment-room, and its decoration and furnishing had commanded materials and mechanical processes unknown in the early Georgian period, and all those materials and processes were misused with vapid brutality to create an effect of richness. Mr. Fry's patient inventory of the ornamentation and contents of that room makes us recall many similar exhibitions of ungoverned profusion. To quote only three sentences from his essay is enough to give a cutting edge to a comparison of the period 1900–1914 with the seventeen-twenties and -thirties. 'On the walls, up to a height of four feet, is a covering of lincrusta walton stamped with a complicated pattern in two colours, with sham silver medallions. Above that a moulding but an inch wide, and yet creeping throughout its whole with a degenerate descendant of a Graeco-Roman carved guilloche pattern; this has evidently been cut out of the wood by machine or stamped out of some composition—its nature is so perfectly concealed that it is hard to say which. Above this is a wall-paper in which an effect of eighteenth-century satin brocade is imitated by shaded staining of the paper.'<sup>1</sup> Mr. Fry attributes 'this eczematous eruption of pattern on the surface of modern manufactures' to the fact that the business of the hack draughtsmen employed by manufacturers 'is to produce, not expressive design, but dead patterns'. 'Dead patterns' were produced in the early seventeenth century, before patronage was educated in design or executant craftsmen understood the principles of architectural composition: 'dead patterns' appeared in the

<sup>1</sup> From the essay on *Art and Socialism*, originally written in 1912.

nineteenth century and lived on into the twentieth because patronage was ignorant and even architects had forgotten—and had, indeed, been urged to forget by John Ruskin—the principles of architectural composition.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the eighteenth century, with architects as directors of taste and design working for educated patrons, no experiment in profusion, no gay rococo antics, resulted in vulgarity or 'dead patterns'. No matter what particular foible of fashion was being accommodated by furniture-makers, good sturdy common sense never allowed the structural bones of furniture to be malformed. Architectural knowledge shaped everything that went into the house of the eighteenth-century gentleman. His candlesticks, his door-knocker, his fireplace furniture and the legs of his easy-chair exactly accorded with the character of the panelling on his walls and the design of his chimney-piece. When he sat in his study or library, wherever his eye fell, he could be certain of seeing comely and gracious things. Nothing jarred upon him. Every article was adjusted to suit his habits, his convenience, his manners and his clothes. For example, the arms of chairs were set back a little from the front of the seat in consideration of the broad skirted coats worn by gentlemen and the spreading pannier skirts of the ladies. Tables of every description were made, tables that were mere ornamental side-pieces, card-tables, occasional-tables, tripod-tables and the most ample and elegant dining-tables.

By the middle of the eighteenth century nearly every

<sup>1</sup> ' . . . whatever betrays the smallest respect for Vitruvian laws or conformity with Palladian work—that we are to endure no more' (*The Stones of Venice*, vol. iii, chap. 4).

article of furniture was made in mahogany. Walnut survivals are found sometimes as late as 1730-40, but English walnut was not used extensively after about 1725. Virginia walnut was sometimes imported from the American colonies, and this dark wood which takes on a reddish hue in time, is often mistaken for mahogany. (Mr. R. W. Symonds in his book *English Furniture from Charles II to George II* illustrates a chest with drawers with a folding top, made in solid Virginia walnut about 1720, on page 123.) On Plate IX a small table of Queen Anne type is illustrated. This is in Virginia walnut. Mahogany gave to the English furniture-maker of the eighteenth century a lovely material, and so appreciative was he of its beauties that he seldom concealed the glowing wood with painting or gilding in the manner of Continental makers. The character of wood itself has always appealed to the English craftsman, and although he has used gilding and inlay he has always made embellishment uncompetitive with the colour and texture of his basic material. The direction of furniture design by the taste of architects never deranged the craftsman's ability to use to the utmost decorative advantage the natural beauty of wood.

On Plate IX a long case clock in figured walnut is also shown. Now this clock derives much of its decorative character from the skilful choosing of veneers for the base and for the door of the case. The mouldings on the base and those which are used at the junction of the case and the head gain additional subtlety of emphasis by reason of thoughtfully picked walnut for their surfaces. The whole of this design exemplifies a studied selection of materials to accord with proportions. In the period that produced this clock large dependence upon

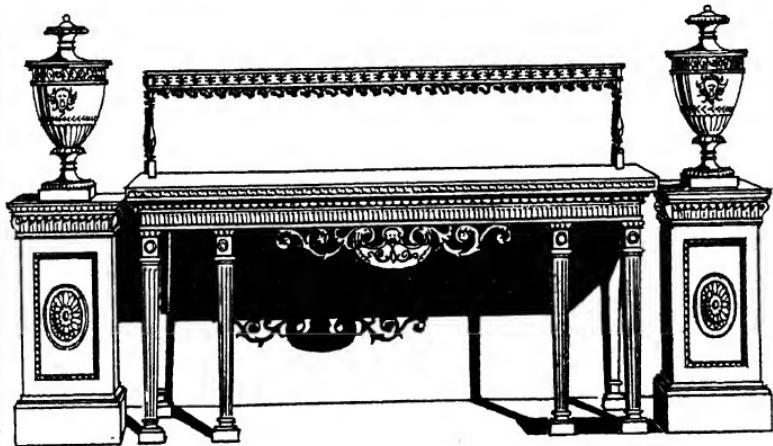
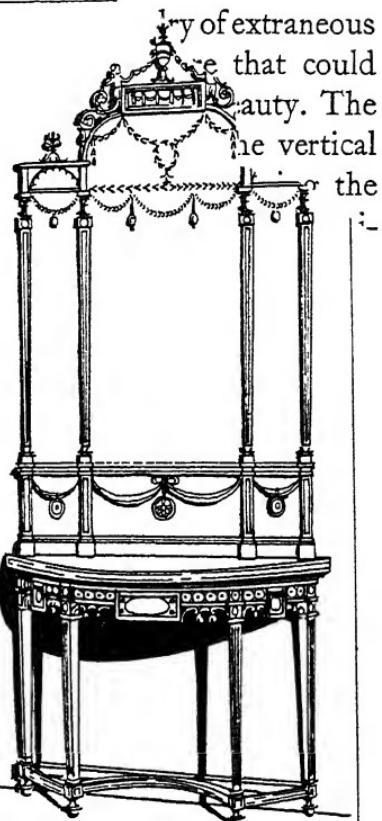
the character of wood for decoration was a recognised fashion. It was an age of great accomplishment in veneering, and in the choosing and matching of colour and figure, in the contrivance of agreeable contrasts in the markings of walnut, and the attainment of delicate accentuations for structural lines.

The English makers' regard for the nature of wood survives every alteration of mode. Consider the Georgian chest shown in Plate X. Observe the disposition of the ornament. It occurs only on those parts that offer the minimum amount of surface for the display of the colour and marking of the mahogany from which the chest is constructed. The drawer front is broken only by three functional features—the two drawer-handles and the lock-plate. Above the drawer is a plain expanse of smokily figured mahogany with one bright functional feature in the upper part, namely the lock-plate. The front of the stand has only one piece of carving, the inverted shell, and the legs with their lightly carved acanthus scrolls springing from rosettes and branching out over the knees ascend into the plain stand framework, and this juxtaposition with a stretch of unadorned surface stresses their fluent lines.

Plate XII again attests the English maker's sense of touch with wood. The mahogany press there illustrated is essentially an architectural piece. Every line certifies the lessons that had been learnt throughout all England from classic architecture. Such furniture by its character suggests a common understanding of the fact that 'Rome was glorious, not profuse. . . .' Reticence in the treatment of any design could hardly be better demonstrated than in the shape and embellishment of this press. The figured mahogany contributes its colour and

FIG. 66. (above) A painted side table with a gilt mirror, c. 1785. Although there is an abundance of delicate ornamentation on both table and mirror frame, a severity of line is preserved which is typical of the work of Robert Adam.

FIG. 67. (below) An Adam side-board with pedestals, painted and gilded.





marking, unspoiled by the intrusive rivalry of extraneous carving or the application of any feature that could detract from the natural amplitude of its beauty. The carved mask is a focal point, terminating the vertical line that divides the cupboard doors, completing the unifying effect already begun by the unbroken horizontal lines of the two bottom drawers of the base, preventing any suggestion of 'an unresolved duality'.<sup>1</sup> The only other carving is upon the four claw-footed legs.

On Plate XIII another mahogany press shows an even stronger imprint of architectural taste. This piece is influenced by the work of Batty Langley. Books and plates like those published by Batty Langley and his brother Thomas, dealing with architectural design, were part of the equipment of the cabinet-maker's workshop and drawing-office when this press was made. But no amount of guidance and authoritative influence regarding the relative proportions of plinth, column and entablature with its architrave, frieze and cornice, could deflect the English cabinet-maker's interest from displaying the material he was using, and from producing something that was fit for its purpose. Batty Langley, long before Horace Walpole began to make Gothic tricks and trinkets fashionable, had published his *Gothic Architecture, Improved by Rules and Proportions, In many Grand Designs of Columns, Doors, Windows, Chimney-pieces, Arcades, Colonades, Porticos, Umbrellos, Temples and Pavillions, etc. with Plans, Elevations and Profiles,*

<sup>1</sup> The classification of certain architectural forms as 'unresolved dualities' has been made by Mr. A. Trystan Edwards in his book *The Things Which are Seen*. The west front of Cologne Cathedral is an unresolved duality; so is the Cathedral at Lucerne; so is a double-domed bureau bookcase; they all have dominating twin vertical units, as subconsciously irritating to the eye as clashing colours.

*Geometrically Expressed.*<sup>1</sup> These solemn creations might have done infinite harm in any age less certain of and happy in its taste. Horace Walpole was severe about Batty Langley's 'services' to Gothic architecture. He believed his books had only taught 'carpenters to massacre that venerable species....' Fortunately by the beginning of the second half of the eighteenth century, it was difficult for carpenters, cabinet-makers and chair-makers to be corrupted by any fashionable freak; and it was unusual, too, for an architect to produce anything clumsy or ungracious however queer or eccentric might be the dictatorship of a transitory mode. The sensitiveness of every architect, craftsman and patron to good proportion was too highly developed for ugliness to be imposed by any unusual experiment in mere novelty.

Mr. R. W. Symonds in that detailed account of the design, material and quality of workmanship in English walnut and mahogany furniture, already mentioned, *English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, writes: 'Not only did the old designers base the proportion of their pieces upon the classical orders, but they copied the sections of mouldings, and in many cases derived their ornament from classical examples. This close adherence in furniture design to architectural principles was specially prevalent in the first three quarters of the eighteenth century and particularly noticeable in such pieces as bookcases and cabinets. Designers in this period sometimes carried the adoption of architectural treatment to the absurd length of combining a bookcase with a structure of classical proportions with Chinese and Gothic motifs.'<sup>2</sup> But even when incongruous examples of architectural detail were incorporated, the

<sup>1</sup> Published at 15s. in 1747.

<sup>2</sup> Chap. i, p. 10.

cabinet-maker's sense of proportion restrained him from perpetrating the clumsy hybrid monsters that appeared in Victorian times, and although to the purist the spectacle of Gothic glazing bars filling the cupboard doors of a bookcase of classical proportions might well be disturbing, it is an offence against academic scholarship rather than against symmetry, sanity or stability.

Thomas Chippendale, in the concluding paragraph of the preface to his book *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director*, first published in 1754, said: 'Upon the whole I have given no design but what may be executed with advantage by the hands of a skilled workman, tho' some of the profession have been diligent enough to represent them (especially those after the Gothic and Chinese manner) as so many specious drawings impossible to be worked off by any mechanic whatsoever. I will not scruple to attribute this to malice, ignorance and inability: And I am confident I can convince all Noblemen, Gentlemen, or others, who will honour me with their commands, that every design in the book can be improved, both as to beauty and enrichment in the execution of it, by their most obedient servant, Thomas Chippendale.' Only on rare occasions was Thomas Chippendale able to convince 'Noblemen, Gentlemen, or others' (architects are presumably included among 'others') that his Chinese and Gothic creations were not 'specious drawings'. Chippendale with a sheet of paper in front of him became repellently inventive; as ornate and as disagreeably profuse as any French fashion-mongering cabinet-maker. It was seldom indeed that he was allowed to make in all their wild extravagance the abominable complexities that he illustrated in his book. But when he and his contemporaries

were extravagant in the use of ornament, they never permitted such ornate indulgence to weaken the structural integrity or debase the harmonious form of their furniture. An example of a richly ornamented chair of Chippendale type is shown on Plate XVI. The legs, the back frame and the pierced back splat are all exquisitely carved in low relief. The stretchers in the under-framing are pierced to correspond with the placing of the ornament on the seat frame and the legs. Here richness is gained without any sacrifice of comfort or stability, without any touch of vulgarity, without gaudiness, without confusion.

By the time Chippendale was writing his book and taking orders from fashionable clients in his London shop in St. Martin's Lane, furniture had gained many new refinements of shape. The ponderousness of the early Georgian period had passed. The cabriole leg was still used, but with less frequency, and the straight leg or the tapering leg for chairs was commoner. The splats of chair-backs were pierced. The ladder-back chair was invented. Endless variations of treatment were created for the filling of chair-backs: sometimes they would accommodate Chinese frets, sometimes interlacing ribbons terminated in leafy scrolls of acanthus, as in the chair on Plate XVI. The chair on Plate XIV shows the transition from the early Georgian type to the more slender Chippendale type. In this chair the cabriole leg and the claw and ball foot are still retained; but a forecast of a later form is given by the back.

Four-post beds with light columns supporting delicate testers of fabric, trimmed with gathered valances of material, replaced the massive state beds of the early eighteenth century. The frontispiece indicates how



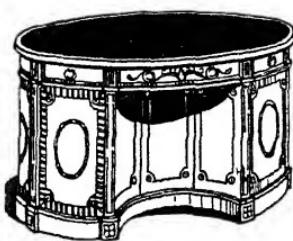
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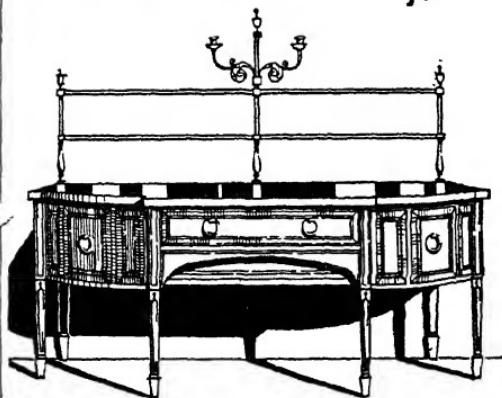
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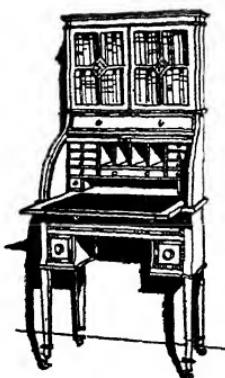
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Figs. 68, 69, 70. Mahogany inlaid chest of drawers, Shearer dressing chest with tambour front, and mahogany bow-fronted chest. Late XVIIIth century.

FIG. 71. Sheraton type mahogany inlaid writing table.

FIG. 72. Hepplewhite mahogany inlaid Pembroke table.

FIG. 73. Balloon clock in mahogany, and satinwood side table. Early XIXth century.

FIG. 74. Shearer sideboard in mahogany and satinwood.

FIG. 75. Sheraton type satinwood bureau.



much had been learnt about shapeliness in bed design by the middle of the century. This plate shows a bed of Adam type in kingwood, although it is really the sort of bed that would normally have been made in mahogany. The delicate twist of the column is based on a classical model; the frieze with the Greek key pattern is already foreshadowing the development of painted furniture which was to be encouraged by the brothers Adam. It exhibits a new partnership between decorative woodwork and decorative fabric. Early Tudor beds had been frames for curtains. Then followed the ponderous wooden structures of the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods when curtains were attached as mere humble fluttering rags to monumental expanses of woodwork. Then came the state bed, depending upon the decorative exploitation of fabrics; every feature of the bed, the head, and the tester being covered completely with damask or velvet or brocade or brocatelle, without exposing any woodwork.<sup>1</sup> But by the middle of the eighteenth century many handsome alliances between wood and fabric had been contrived, and it was in the columns of those beds and in the regulation of their proportions that architectural influence again created numberless formal urbanities.

Beds gave Chippendale scope for indulging his ornamental proclivities. He drew a number of what he described as Gothic beds, wherein an unhappy comingling of Gothic and rococo ornament enlivened the head, the canopy and the supporting columns. (Batty Langley may have had as much to answer for as Horace Walpole believed.)

Sir William Chambers, the architect of Somerset

<sup>1</sup> See Fig. 42 on p. 71.

House, the Albany in Piccadilly, and those little gem-like buildings in Kew Gardens, the pavilions, also the orangery and pagoda, must have regretted the impetus given to the Chinese taste by his own work on Chinese buildings and furniture whenever he was confronted with one of Chippendale's deplorably ornate Chinese designs. Sir William Chambers, in his treatise on *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines and Utensils* (published in 1757), showed how his imagination had been impressed by his travels in the East; and when he occasionally experimented in some modified form of Chinese design, as in the pagoda at Kew Gardens, he demonstrated how perfectly under the control of sound classical taste were these Oriental fancies, how gentlemanly, how correct they became when taught their manners and put through their paces by an accomplished architect. Poor Mr. Chippendale, excellent craftsman and fashionable cabinet-maker though he was, found strong draughts of Oriental inspiration too much for his sense of proportion, which dissolved together with his sense of ornamental propriety whenever he was stimulated to design, on paper, something in the Chinese taste. He suggested not only Chinese beds, but Chinese sofas, most unhandy pieces of furniture, cumbered with canopies and overwhelmed with ornament. Unless Chippendale had come periodically under the discipline of architectural taste he might have ruined his business by thrusting at his clients these complicated Chinese and Gothic experiments. He was employed by the brothers Adam to make furniture to their design. Few architects, and indeed few English ladies and gentlemen of that time, would have commissioned him to execute the wildest of the extra-

gances that appeared in the plates of *The Director*. The Gothic taste had to wait to be made fashionable by Horace Walpole; had to be chatted about by people who wanted to be in the mode, before it could grow and achieve such fantastic triumphs as Fonthill Abbey. It never seriously influenced the form of furniture in the eighteenth century, but, like the Chinese taste, was productive of ornamental details, frets and so forth, some of which were agreeable enough. Whenever Chippendale essayed to make the queer things that he drew in *The Director*, his ability as a craftsman, his abundance of good English sense about structure and form, saved him from producing what appears on paper to be mere-tricious and 'specious'.

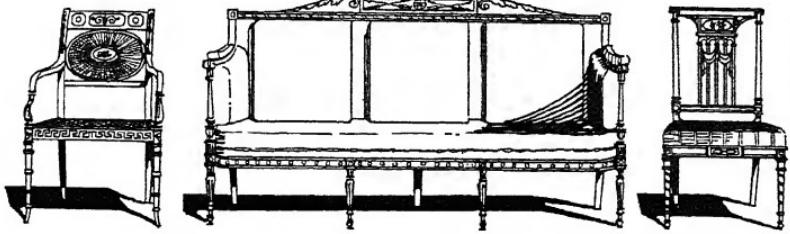
Chippendale had opportunities for making elaborate decorative things, and his brackets, chimney-pieces, mirrors, picture frames, girandoles, fire-screens, pier glasses, torcheres, hanging book-shelves, stands for vases and so forth displayed in many drawing-rooms, salons and boudoirs the effervescent gaiety of light, gilded carving. Chinese *motifs* supplied the theme for many of these fragile extravagances; but occasionally the design of a girandole was clearly taken from one of Piranesi's delineations of Roman ruins. A couple of solitary columns supporting a fragment of entablature would be counterbalanced by the remains of an arcade; a Chinese tree would grow through the ruins; perhaps an urn would mourn upon a pedestal; and, flowing in and out of the base of the design, the plastic coils of acanthus leaves would convey all the fluid extremes of rococo taste.

Contemporary with Chippendale were W. Ince and J. Mayhew and Robert Manwaring. In 1748 Ince and

Mayhew had published a book entitled *Household Furniture* whose plates included 300 designs of articles as varied as 'hall chairs, lanthorns, staircase lights, side-boards, claw tables, tea-kettle stands, bookcases, secretaires, library steps, writing-tables, music desks, canopy beds, French bed-chairs, dressing-tables, book and china shelves', etc. In 1765 a more exalted volume on this subject was produced by the same authors, who called it *Genteel Household Furniture in the Present Taste by a Society of Upholsterers, Cabinet-makers, etc.* A second edition was called for, and in this chair designs by other makers appeared, among them work by Robert Manwaring. In 1766 Manwaring published *The Chair-makers Guide*. Ince, Mayhew and Manwaring all made furniture very similar in character to that designed by Chippendale. It is not suggested that they were imitating Chippendale, nor is it suggested that Chippendale was a solitary originator of furniture who invented an entirely fresh style. Mr. R. W. Symonds reminds us that: 'On the contemporary evidence available it is not possible to admit that in the eighteenth century Chippendale was considered anything more than a successful tradesman, and one specially noteworthy for making furniture of very good quality'.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Chippendale died in 1779. The type of furniture which he had made, and which his numerous contemporaries also made, was replaced by the furniture of Hepplewhite and his school of furniture design. Chippendale had retained a certain squareness in the chair form except in those types that were deliberate adaptations of French models with backs filled with fabric; and despite his ornamental outbreaks

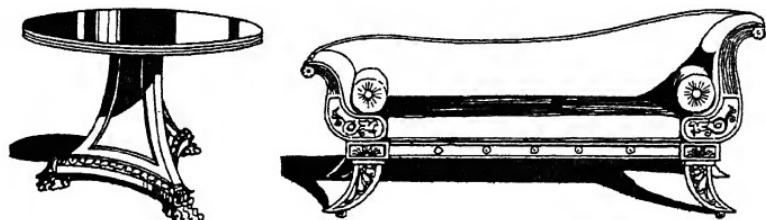
<sup>1</sup> *English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, chap. iii, p. 181.



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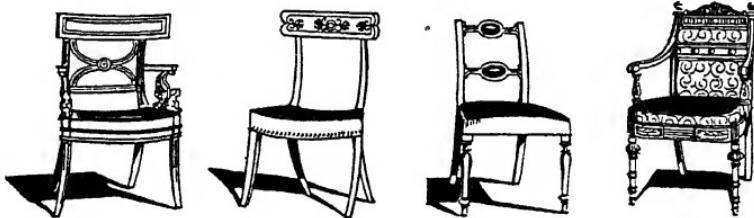
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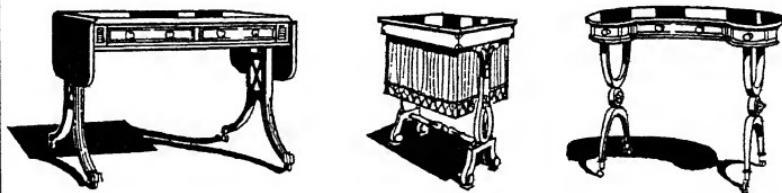


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Figs. 76, 77, 78. Satinwood chair with oval cane panel in back and settee and painted chair. Sheraton types, late XVIIIth century.

Figs. 79, 80. English Empire and Regency furniture: mahogany tripod table with brass mounts, and rosewood sofa with metal mounts.

Figs. 81, 82. Rosewood chairs with inlaid brass lines.

Figs. 83, 84. Rosewood chair with horsehair seat and carved chair with silk upholstery.

FIG. 85. Carved mahogany sofa table. FIG. 86. Rosewood work table.

FIG. 87. Kidney-shaped writing table in satinwood.



he retained an affection for solidity and for visible strength.) Hepplewhite and his contemporary Shearer carried refinement of form almost to the pitch of flimsiness. It is possible that the designs of Robert and James Adam showed them how delicate chairs and tables and sideboards, commodes, tripods, torcheres and beds could be; but they eschewed the slender firmness of line which is typical of Adam design, and experimented, sometimes unhappily, sometimes with grace and exquisite effect.<sup>1</sup> Hepplewhite invented the shield-back chair. This frame in the shape of a shield was filled sometimes by simple splats, two, three or four, sometimes with a vase *motif* in the centre, sometimes with festoons and occasionally the fluffy plumes of the Prince of Wales' feathers would be unfurled. The shield shape could be surprisingly varied; it occasionally became an oval, it was sometimes partly filled with fine cane-work. For settees, three or four shield-shaped chair-backs would be conjoined, or simple curving backs upholstered and continuous with the seat would be used. Always the legs of Hepplewhite chairs and settees would taper. Very rarely would there be a slight curve outwards towards the foot. Often the legs would be turned, sometimes they would be fluted or channelled, occasionally ornament in light relief would be carved upon them.

The brothers Adam designed painted furniture, chairs with small decorative plaques in the centre of the back, commodes in satinwood with panels painted thereon. They designed houses complete in every detail and they were meticulously correct in the ornament which they employed. Their work strongly influenced contemporary taste in furniture, and their designs caused cabinet-makers and chair-makers to explore

many new ways of obtaining slender and delicate shapes. Robert Adam was the designer in this famous partnership. 'He reduced the refinement of architectural forms to a condition of frigid delicacy. Severe in outline, and painstakingly correct in every classical detail of their abundant and beautiful ornamentation, Adam's schemes were somewhat dehumanised. He designed houses complete with their contents, ordaining for ceilings and carpets, curtains, chair coverings and furniture the coldly elegant decoration that he pieced together from his profound knowledge of Greek and Roman ornament. He employed such artists as Pergolesi, Cipriani, Zucchi, and his wife, Angelica Kauffmann, to embellish with their little exquisite paintings the furniture and the rooms of the houses he built.'<sup>1</sup> Adam furniture achieves a slim perfection of formality. The painted side-table shown in Fig. 66 on p. 101 reveals this characteristic: all the vertical lines stream upwards, but not too gushingly; there is no generous vigour about the ascending columns of the mirror frame; they are not intended to support a pediment massive with hearty swags of fruit and flowers. Compare the exquisite attenuation of this design with the decorative lustiness of the gilt console table and mirror illustrated in Fig. 52 on p. 89. Less than half a century separates these two examples of English furniture, but the only thing they have in common is architectural orderliness. In its old age the eighteenth century began to part with the appearance of stability; its furniture-makers flirted with flimsiness; and this over-refinement of forms followed the staid interval when the taste of Robert Adam froze into rigid attitudes the flowing lines of chairs and tables

<sup>1</sup> *Men and Buildings*, chap. vii, p. 117.

and cabinets. And yet all Adam's furniture had dignity; though perhaps some of it was over-dignified, lean and stiff. Look at the painted and gilded sideboard in Fig. 67 on p. 101 with its guardian pedestals. Its proportions are noble; its ornamentation a tribute to excellent judgement; but it lacks the comfortable assurance of cheerful service at dinner-time that the Shearer and Sheraton types of sideboard (Figs. 74 and 89 on pp. 107 and 125) convey; the Adam sideboard suggests state occasions; the others suggest intimate and witty dinner parties.

Although one of the effects of Robert Adam's taste was to increase the use of painted furniture, and although satinwood occasionally flashed its bright yellow surfaces in bedrooms and drawing-rooms and boudoirs, mahogany was still the principal furniture wood. The sort of mahogany used in the eighteenth century is now unobtainable, for it was cut near the coast in the West Indies, coming generally from San Domingo and the Bahamas, and the coastal belts of mahogany forest have been exhausted.

By the close of the eighteenth century there was an almost bewildering variety of mahogany furniture for increasing the convenience and comfort of life. In the bedroom there were light and delicately ornamental four-posters; wardrobes; chests, bow-fronted and serpentine-fronted; tallboys; toilet mirrors; dressing-tables, most intricately equipped; and even washstands. In the dining-room there were sideboards, mere carving tables, or more accommodating designs equipped with drawers and cupboards, and bow-fronted, elliptical, concave or serpentine-fronted. There were dumb-waiters and wine-coolers. There were magnificent

dining-tables that could be extended with extra leaves to accommodate any number of guests, and a table had been invented which solved for all time that most distressing problem: the conflict that exists between human legs and wooden ones at a dinner party. This table was supported by a column at each end which rested on four feet splayed outwards, really a revival of the principle of support used in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century trestle tables. For seating in every part of the house chairs had developed manifold elegances and comforts. There were easy-chairs and settees and window-seats and sofas; upholstery had become a union of decorative display with comfort. And all this furniture was consistently well proportioned. All of it exhibited a regard for human contours. Not all of it was beautiful; but its makers never erred through ignorance of good proportion nor neglect of common sense. If ever it was a little worrying to the eye, it was because of the exuberance of its maker, who, in his anxiety to be modish, occasionally overdid his effects and became muddled.

Thomas Sheraton, although he began life as a journeyman cabinet-maker, did not practise furniture-making on the fashionable scale of his predecessors Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Shearer. Little, if any, furniture can be definitely attributed to him, and he is known chiefly for his influence upon contemporary design. In 1791 Sheraton published *The Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer's Drawing Book*, which went into a second edition in 1793 and a third in 1802. In 1802 and 1803 Sheraton issued another work, entitled *The Cabinet Dictionary, containing an Explanation of all the Terms used in the Cabinet, Chair and Upholstery Branches, Containing a Display of Useful Articles of Furniture*. A far more



E.W. 1924.

FIG. 88. A dining-room, c. 1820. A typical interior in the sort of house that was being built by Nash, during what is perhaps the most satisfying phase of English architecture. The form of the furniture is austere, and it has lost the extreme attenuation of Sheraton design. But there is not a hint of the coarseness that was to invade all furniture forms within twenty-five years of the time when a room such as this was first furnished.



elaborate book was issued in parts in 1804 under the title of *The Cabinet Maker, Upholsterer and General Artist's Encyclopaedia*. Sheraton died in 1806, and eighty-four plates of *Designs for Household Furniture* were published six years after his death.

The conditions under which Sheraton produced his work were peculiar and unusual. It is doubtful whether he ever came into contact with any of the fashionable architects of the period. His surroundings were squalid. After he came to London in 1790 and started to write books, he apparently abandoned cabinet-making for authorship, interspersed with the delivery of sermons and the teaching of drawing. This picture of Sheraton is given in *The Memoirs of Adam Black*, for when the young Scottish founder of that publishing house first came to London he lodged with Sheraton for a few days.

There is about all Sheraton's designs an almost brittle fragility. He made drawings not only of chairs and tables and bookcases and beds, but designs for window drapery and schemes of interior decoration. He was addicted to complicated draperies, and, like Chippendale, the bed seemed to tempt him to fatuous extravagances. The glazed doors of bookcases and secretaires also enabled him to indulge in spidery complexities; queer involved glazing bars; meagre pediments, thinly up-raised above the cornice line. In his sideboards and cabinets he used inlaid lines of box and ebony, shell devices and narrow curls and scrolls of ornament. He invented a number of intricate dressing-tables and wash-stands, also cheval glasses, work-tables and various complicated dual-purpose pieces of furniture, such as tables that could be converted into library steps, and

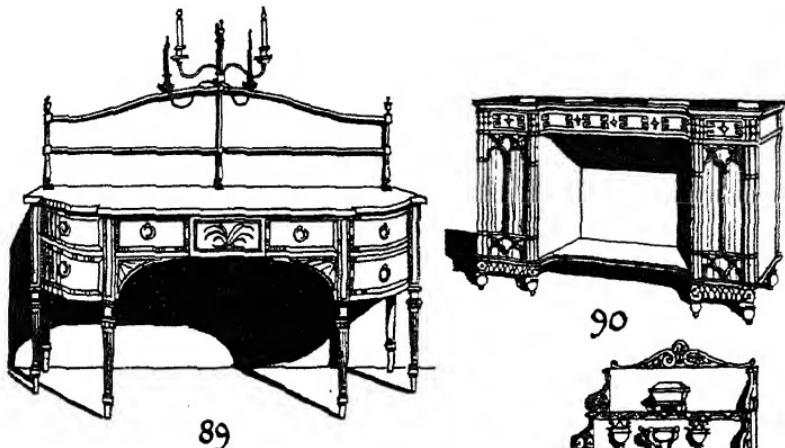
other specimens of ingenious cabinet-making, with ingenuity often eliminating comeliness.

Sheraton designed such a variety of furniture, and bequeathed so many ideas, that his influence lasted well into the nineteenth century, although after the third decade the forms he originally set down were subjected to distortions which would have caused him considerable pain had he lived to see them. In his book there was a multiplicity of table models: sofa-tables, library-tables, work-tables, every form of writing-table. Most of his designs lacked compactness. He was so determined to be elegant at all costs; and thin legs, attenuated frames and light touches of ornament were restlessly united often to the detriment of good proportion. Looking through pages of these lean and shrunken things, it seems as though the furniture of the late eighteenth century died in a decline, that it wasted away, became rickety. All the robust and florid curves of the mid-eighteenth century had gone. Sometimes the bold, concave or elliptical front of a sideboard would suggest the more forcible cabinet-making of the thirties and forties of the century, but often in the simpler pieces made under Sheraton's influence can we discern the respect for proportion and understanding of appropriate ornamentation which distinguished the best work of the early Chippendale type of furniture. The mahogany inlaid chest of drawers, illustrated by Fig. 68 on page 107, shows how furniture of the Sheraton type could achieve an ultra-refinement of decoration, and a reduction of material to the barest structural necessities without loss of dignity. The satinwood side-table shown in Fig. 73 on the same page comes perilously close to flimsiness. Those frail turned legs, spun to a slenderness that almost

snaps; that wiry stretcher with its platform top  
urn; those minute ball feet: surely when this was made  
the English cabinet-maker had begun to abandon his  
traditional convictions about stability? Compare that  
satinwood side-table with the painted Adam side-table  
of Fig. 66. It is only twenty years later, but by com-  
parison the Adam table seems almost stout, and if you  
compare it as we compared the Adam table previously  
with the gilt console table in Fig. 52, the Sheraton model  
becomes positively ethereal, a mere bubble of wood,  
scarcely able to support the weight of the balloon clock  
that rests upon its top.

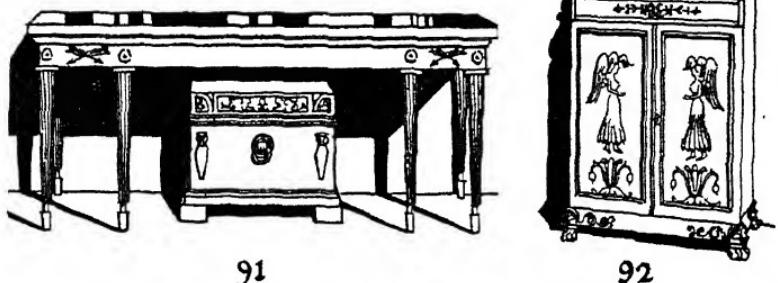
Compare the satinwood elbow-chair with the cane-  
back, the satinwood settee covered in silk, and the single  
chair in satinwood with painted decoration on page 113  
(Figs. 76, 77, 78), with the shield-back chairs and  
settee shown on page 95 (Figs. 63, 64, 65). The satin-  
wood Sheraton types are barely a quarter of a century  
older than the Hepplewhite shield-back types, and yet  
the refining influence which was begun by Adam and  
continued by Hepplewhite is carried so much further  
that we might be forgiven for wondering whether it  
had not been carried too far. When Sheraton took to  
authorship and the drawing-board side of design he  
may insensibly, after a few years, have parted with  
some of his disciplined reverence for material. Robert  
Adam knew exactly how far delicacy of line could be  
practised. Many of Sheraton's designs suggest that he  
was incapable of judging how far slimming could be  
taken in the form of furniture.

The ornament which Sheraton used was nearly all  
classical in origin. Here and there



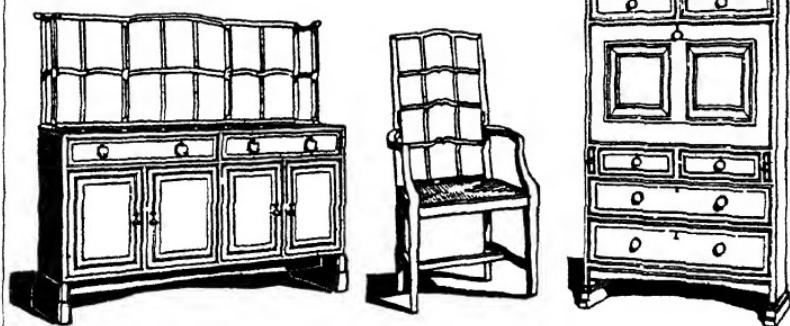
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FIG. 89. Sheraton type, inlaid mahogany sideboard, c. 1790-1800.  
FIG. 90. Mahogany sideboard inlaid with brass lines, c. 1810.

Figs. 91, 92. English Empire rosewood sideboard and wine cooler, and rosewood cabinet with brass mounts.

Figs. 93, 94, 95. Furniture in oak and walnut, first third of XXth century, influenced in design by the work of Ernest Gimson and Sidney Barnsley.



true to its traditional character. Sometimes it was painted, more often the dark red of mahogany was used with exquisite advantage. On Plate XIX an English Empire bookcase is shown in black and gold on ball feet, with the back stepped to fit over a dado rail. The carved ends of this bookcase with their fluted fronts exactly agree with the curving lines of chairs of this period, and all furniture at that time was a study in easily flowing lines. On Plate XVIII there is a cane-seated chair with Sphinxes' heads below the arm terminals. This chair exemplifies this subtle flow of curves, so readily devised in the days when proportion was still understood. Perhaps one of the most vivid proofs of the ability of English designers to behave with the utmost eccentricity and yet to preserve perfect proportion is to be found on Plate XX. This table, with the base supported on dogs' heads, and the four queer figures, their bodies encased in a tapering fluted box from the lower part of which their feet project in a gilded cluster, is essentially a joke; but it is a drawing-room joke. The most perfect propriety of form is preserved. Probably this table was the work of Thomas Hope: it strongly suggests the type of design he committed to paper, and in the choice of materials and in their finish it represents to the highest degree the ability of the English furniture designer to accommodate any freak or foible demanded by fashion without making his design ridiculous. What later age could indulge in such fooling without fear of vulgarity? What later age could have produced the Pavilion at Brighton without parting with every shred of architectural decency? The Pavilion at Brighton is just such another piece of fooling as this table, although on a larger scale. Both were the work of designers to whom the principles

of architectural design were vital guides to the shaping of everything.

Designers and patrons were still educated at the end of the Georgian period. Visual tranquillity was still prized. The noblest phase of English architecture was then at its zenith: the orderly stucco streets and mansions of Nash and his contemporaries were giving a mellow dignity to great areas of London, to Brighton and to Hove and Cheltenham and Tenby. In that age of fine street-planning when houses still had noble proportions, furnishing was a harmonious complement to the decorative background and furniture forms were not debased by a mindless appetite for novelty. And yet novelty was in the air, and was recognised as a danger to design. In his *Observations on English Architecture* the Rev. James Dallaway, M.B., F.S.A., writing in 1806, says: 'Indeed, the ambition of producing novelty, so conspicuous in the present age, does not promise well for the national architecture.—A happy imitation is of much more value than a defective original; and to copy excellence with spirit and character is a test of no inferior ability.'<sup>1</sup>

But novelty won, and led English taste so far from sense that within a century people were accepting as 'artistic' such horrors as bronze statuettes of the Venus of Milo with a gargantuan navel in the form of a clock; whatnots that were mazes of fretwork; and tea-tables and occasional-tables and fern-stands of bamboo, spiked together with nails and varnished, apparently with gum. When Dallaway wrote the passion for novelty was only a threat. After the Georgian period it was a great power, and design died under its rule.

<sup>1</sup> Section ix, pp. 227-8.

## CHAPTER VI

### FURNITURE DESIGN UNDER THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT AND THE FURNITURE TRADE, 1830-1900

In Queen Victoria and her intellectual consort, Prince Albert, the Fine Arts of Great Britain have happily found protectors, who, knowing the value of elegance and refinement, in a wealthy and commercial nation, are disposed to promote their interests with a zeal proportioned to the high moral value which they undoubtedly possess. They have distinguished themselves as lovers and guides of its noblest walks and most elevated performances; the great artists both of our own and foreign nations have been made the companions of their leisure hours, and the progress of their works from the first to the finished stages, have become the subject of Royal amusement, and the source of its more elevated and permanent enjoyments.

LONDON INTERIORS: 1841

LITTLE can be said about design between 1830 and the time when William Morris began to put upon a productive basis his experiments in hand-craft revival. Plenty of furniture was made. Much of it was well made. The great Georgian tradition of excellence in proportion and convenience in use died slowly. In some places it lived on until machine production made it possible to supply the uneducated with complicated and flimsy things instead of structurally sound and relatively simple furniture. Taste either ossified in romantic antiquarianism, or else it degenerated into a snobbish appetite for lavish display.

The romantic antiquarians went Gothic with a spiky profusion of pinnacles, crotchets, finials and blind-pointed arcading. Carving came into fashion again, and

sideboards and tables and chairs crawled with floriated *motifs*, encrustations which were supposed to convey an authentic mediaeval air. This mode followed contemporary architecture, which was bursting into the full disorder of the Gothic revival, while John Ruskin's sonorous directions for the achievement of aesthetic anarchy encouraged everyone to despise the principles of design and the attainment of good proportion.

Everything was judged by realistic standards. Carving was realistic. Conventions of ornament were no longer appreciated, unless they were heraldic. All surfaces were crowded with decoration that did nothing to unify the design of any piece of furniture; every area was unrestfully competitive and individually self-contained. In the heavily carved furniture of early Georgian times, every leaf of acanthus, every swelling moulding, were articulate parts of a general design which was conceived as a whole. In the heavily carved furniture of early Victorian times every piece of ornament made strident claims for attention at the expense of general unity in the design. Such gross stuff was made by craftsmen working for tradesmen, and those tradesmen supplied customers whose standards (so far as they had any) were realism in the execution of ornament complicated by a romantic love of 'the good old times'. One of the most ardent of the Gothic revivalists, August Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-52), published designs for Gothic furniture, and provided many examples of ornament for imitation. He was perhaps the last architect to exert a distinctive influence upon furniture design generally. Possibly Sir Walter Scott was really responsible for associating Gothic forms with 'the good old times'; but by-products of this amalgam of ideas were

spurious heartiness in the decoration of furniture,<sup>e</sup> were  
rollicking confusion of form.<sup>variety</sup>

All the dropsical symptoms of bad taste that appeared under the patronage of the new rich in England play bethan and early Stuart furniture again emerged, with education was weakened by prosperity. Swollen turn gold destroyed the proportions of chair and table legs; squat and inflated upholstery bulged inelegantly in libraries and studies, while spidery contortions reigned in the drawing-room and boudoir. Various queer styles were invented by the furniture trade; and the most memorable of these outcrops of ingenuity was the papier-maché furniture made in the 'forties and 'fifties. This material, finished generally in black, was painted and inlaid, sometimes with ivory and mother-of-pearl; and trays, occasional-tables, work-tables, tea-tables and chairs of different types were made of it. Views of buildings or chaste landscapes sometimes formed the chief ornamental feature; and a set of papier-maché chairs might combine accommodation with moral antiquarian improvement by having pictures in colour of English cathedrals applied to their backs and protectively varnished.

The only distinctive chair form made in the early Victorian period was the open circular-framed back, the 'Quaker' chair as it used to be called by the trade. It had the merit of simplicity, which was cancelled out by the crime of bad proportion. In the country good, sound, simple chairs were still made; and to this day High Wycombe produces Windsor chairs in much the same forms that were used in the early nineteenth century, for the Windsor chair is a type that can be and has been intelligently adapted for mechanical production,

sideboaragh even now the ‘bodgers’ or turners produce by motifs, ein scores of little workshops in the Buckingham-authen woods a large proportion of the beech legs and porary of the Windsor chairs that are assembled in disordcombe factories.

The suite ruled the ideas of Victorian furniture-anarckers. It was the last vestige of Georgian unity, and of de awful sterility of the mercantile alliance of retailer and manufacturer was demonstrated by the monotony of those mahogany chairs and tables and sideboards that proclaimed their relationship by identical assortments of bloated ornament. The provision of shelves and tables and complicated cabinets was an important activity of the furniture industry, for the Victorians accumulated minor possessions with an enthusiasm that would have been short-lived except in an age of cheap and abundant domestic labour. Here is a description of the rooms of a wealthy Oxford undergraduate who was supposed to be a man about taste: at least that is the impression Cuthbert Bede, who wrote *The Adventures of Mr. Verdant Green*, wished to convey.

‘The sitting-room was large and lofty, and was panelled with oak throughout. At the further end was an elaborately carved bookcase of walnut wood, filled with books gorgeously bound in every tint of morocco and vellum, with their backs richly tooled in gold. . . . The panels were covered with the choicest engravings (all proofs-before-letters), and with water-colour drawings by Cattermole, Cox, Fripp, Hunt, and Frederick Tayler—their wide, white margins being sunk in light gilt frames. Above these gleamed groups of armour, standing out effectively (and theatrically), against the dark oak panels, and full of “reflected lights”, that would

have gladdened the heart of Macrise. There were couches of velvet, and lounging chairs of every variety and shape. There was a Broadwood's grand pianoforte, on which Mr. Foote, although uninstructed, could play skilfully. There were round tables and square tables, and writing-tables; and there were side-tables with statuettes and Swiss carvings, and old china, and gold apostle-spoons, and lava ware, and Etruscan vases, and a swarm of Spiers' elegant knick-knackeries. There were reading-stands of all sorts: Briarean-armed brazen ones, that fastened on to the chair you sat in, sloping ones to rest on the table before you, elaborately carved in open work, and an upright one of severe Gothic, like a lectern, where you were to stand and read without contracting your chest. Then there were all kinds of stands to hold books: sliding ones, expanding ones, portable ones, heavy fixture ones, plain mahogany ones, and oak ones made glorious by Margetts with the arms of Oxford and St. John's, carved and emblazoned on the ends.'

'Elegant knick-knackeries' provided the light relief in a world of ponderous mahogany; and sometimes the 'knick-knackerie' touch was extended to the form of furniture itself. Mr. Roger Fry in his essay on 'The Ottoman and the Whatnot'<sup>1</sup> recalls 'a genuine modern style which as yet has no name, a period of black polished wood with spidery lines of conventional flowers incised in the wood and then gilt. These things must have belonged to the 'eighties—I think they went with the bustle. . . .'

Before the last half of the nineteenth century had begun, every trace of Georgian order had been obliterated.

<sup>1</sup> In *Vision and Design*.

ated from furniture design and from furnishing and interior decoration. William Morris and his friends had discovered after building the Red House that it was impossible to buy anything that was well designed, and in 1861 they founded Morris and Company, which was to remedy this diseased condition of decorative and applied art.<sup>1</sup> They did not dream of restoring respect for Georgian order; they were infected with the Romantic movement, and their eyes sought and found in the Middle Ages what they confidently believed to be the golden age of craftsmanship. Philip Webb, Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, Faulkner and Marshall assisted Morris to form this firm; and its work soon started a new fashion for 'hand-made' things. The furniture trade presently began to manufacture articles that were labelled 'hand-made', with surfaces mechanically roughened or spattered with mock hammer-marks to suggest the honest toil of muscular fingers. But the example of Morris's work was to lead the furniture trade into a deeper morass of imitation, in which it flounders to this day.

There were occasional attempts to resurrect older styles of furniture in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. Most of those artistic revolts were abortive, and the pages of *Punch* show that heavy furniture and overpowering decoration still formed the background of social life. The aspidistra upheld its leaves, a cluster of flimsy short swords, proclaiming, according

<sup>1</sup> 'William Morris in 1859 commissioned his friend and fellow-student Philip Webb to build him a house, and in so doing he came near to inaugurate a new manner. This house was to be something more than a dwelling, it was to stand as a solid declaration of faith. It was to be the architectural statement of the beliefs of the Arts and Crafts movement.'—C. and A. Williams-Ellis, *The Pleasures of Architecture*, chap. iii.

to legend, the wealth of the family, for each leaf was supposed to represent a hundred pounds of the householder's annual income. Everybody collected odds and ends that were supposed to be 'artistic'. That ill-used word nearly always implied the *application* of a finish or a pattern to an object, or the introduction of an extraneous article—a piece of pottery or glass or metal-work. And the furniture trade, varying its principal activity of providing respectable masses of mahogany for solid and respectable English subjects, was able to make a few 'artistic' experiments in period furniture. They were sporadic experiments. It was not until the increasing power of William Morris's teaching had unintentionally encouraged reactionary tendencies in taste that the furniture trade really felt sure of a market for 'the period styles'.

Some architects in this Victorian disorder mourned the control they had lost over design. In 1880 Mr. Robert W. Edis, F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A., delivered a series of Cantor lectures before the Society of Arts, and published them in an amplified form as a book the following year, entitled *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses*. He had something to say about contemporary furnishing, and little of it was complimentary. He wrote: 'I must be forgiven if, as an architect, I regret that in these days the designing of furniture is, as a rule, handed over to the upholsterer, and that the houses we build are oft-times filled with articles incongruous in design, bad in taste, and often utterly commonplace and uncomfortable. This criticism does not apply to some of our principal manufacturers, who have striven to lead the public into more artistic thoughts, and have provided for them work which is at once good in design

and treatment, graceful and pleasant in form, and finished in the highest possible way, both as regards artistic character and skill of handicraft. But these gentlemen, like other artists, have a cloud of imitators, whose works are set forth as of "Old English", "Queen Anne", or some other special and equally applicable period or fashion, and which, while aiming to be cheap, are equally commonplace and nasty, and are filled with carvings of the most execrable character, or with some miserable painted daub, bad in drawing and in colour, which is made to do duty as a panel, and is set forth as high art; and from its gaudiness—or, if you like it better, eccentricity of design—commends itself to those whose taste is not of the highest kind, but whose ambition to possess gaudy finery and something to show off, is great and insatiable.'<sup>1</sup>

A little earlier in his book, Mr. Edis mentions a new fashion 'dedicated to her most sacred Majesty, Queen Anne, a fashion which has developed much of really good art character, and which, after all, properly applied, is really bringing us back to old English work'. He does not seem able to judge the work of any period save by its ornamentation. To him, and to his contemporaries, the character of furniture appeared to be derived from its embellishment, and not only do the illustrations in his book confirm this but it is suggested by this sentence: 'Nor is extravagance of cost necessary for the fitting up of our houses; for I hold that furniture of thoroughly good art design, comfortable in shape, and good in workmanship, may be made without any extravagant outlay, and that plain polished or painted deal furniture, of really good design, is better than all

<sup>1</sup> Pp. 34-5.

the elaboration of Chippendale fretwork or Queen Anne ornamentation'.<sup>1</sup>

The restless roving among the forgotten styles of the Georgian age that Victorians with some pretensions to taste indulged in during the 'eighties is inexplicable. Perhaps a sense of loss was aroused by William Morris's denunciation of contemporary design, which could not be appeased by the mediaeval solutions Morris proposed and practised. A suggestion that England at that time was suffering from a belated rococo phase is made by Adolph Reichwein in his book *China and Europe*. It is an interesting Continental view of English taste.

'In the eighties of the nineteenth century, the appearance was noted of an "English Rococo" as a curious temporary phase of culture. This development is generally known among theorists of art as "English aestheticism". The fact that Botticelli, although he had been known long before, has since then continued to be a special favourite with the English public, is to be ultimately ascribed to a state of soul which once more preferred just these lines and just these colours rather than others. That Rossetti was admired at the time along with Botticelli, that his favourite flowers, the lily, with its soft delicate curves and slender stem, and the sunflower, were to be seen on so many tables in England —who can say why this was so? All that can be said is that people did fall in love once more with the delicate colours and graceful stems of these flowers; they fell in love, too, with the delicate hues of porcelain. Rossetti collected blue and white Chinese porcelain. And all England, by unuttered mutual consent, suddenly did the same. Need it then astonish us to learn that the old

<sup>1</sup> P. 16.

eighteenth-century furniture was once more dragged forth from dusty lumber rooms, just for the sake of its delicately curved lines? Chairs, wardrobes and elegant spider-legged tables again received the place of honour. For the furniture of Sheraton, so long dispossessed by the plain and solid Victorian furniture, every village and every cottage was ransacked. Even the furniture factories remodelled themselves on Chippendale and Sheraton.<sup>1</sup>

Such a reorientation of design did not take place then in the furniture trade. The passion for discovering old furniture in lumber-rooms and cottages had not yet developed into a force that was to change the economic structure of the furniture trade. The Victorian public was too devoted to extraneous fancy work, too insensitive to good proportion, to appreciate anything designed in the Georgian age. After all, Mr. Edis in 1881 could write: 'The age of Batty Langley produced furniture as false and meretricious in taste as the rooms it was designed to fill'.<sup>2</sup> The romantic movement had destroyed the judgement of architects; the furniture trade had destroyed the traditional common sense of designers, and machinery had almost destroyed the craftsmen.

The nineteenth century was a century of great achievement.

<sup>1</sup> P. 71. J. C. Powell's translation, 1925 English edition.

<sup>2</sup> *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses*, p. 30.

## CHAPTER VII

### FURNITURE DESIGN UNDER THE ANTIQUE DEALERS AND ARTIST-CRAFTSMEN, 1900- 1920

WILLIAM MORRIS sincerely felt that only by turning back to the past could civilised amenities be preserved. That industry could ever be made orderly and clean and civilised never occurred to him; and perhaps in the days when Victorian individualism was unchained and raging, any idea of tidying up industry may well have seemed quite hopeless. Outraged by its external untidiness, by its vast carelessness, by its casual pollution of water, land and air, Morris put industry out of his mind as far as he could, and never thought of its potential activities, of what it might be made to do if designers took a share in controlling it instead of leaving it entirely in the hands of business men and uncaring technicians. If William Morris had lived in these disillusioned times instead of in a period when industrial prosperity seemed so safe, so certain, so amply assured of progressive expansion, his conviction that mechanical production was evil might have impelled him to start a really vigorous movement for its abolition. Living when he did, he only founded an escapist cult, which has comforted a large number of nervous and ineffectual people ever since.

Sir Hubert Llewellyn Smith, in *The Economic Laws*

*of Art Production*, discusses the repudiation of the productive powers of industry by William Morris. 'No one', he writes, 'was more keenly sensible than William Morris of the inherent contradiction between certain features of the revival of English arts and crafts, which he initiated, and the social and economic conditions of the mass of the English population at the time. His own art production, magnificent as it was, was predominantly an *art de luxe*, and so far as its patrons were private individuals they were mostly persons far above the average in riches. This was certainly not because the prices charged were excessive, but because the works were essentially costly to produce. There is evidence in Dr. Mackail's *Life of William Morris* that the contradiction was to him a continual source of disquiet. His own proposed solution was not to reconcile his art work to the necessities imposed by current conditions (that would probably have seemed to him a debasement of art), but rather to bring art within reach of the mass of the people by a total change in their economic position.'<sup>1</sup> To effect this change Morris wanted a revolution. Today we are apt to forget his militant socialism, and can recall only the passive dreaming of *News from Nowhere*. While waiting for the social revolution, and in order to

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,  
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,

you went to the Cotswolds and did weaving or exotic embroidery upon slippers, committing the most fearful patterns in the name of handicraft, a practice deemed necessary before the decree *nisi* of divorce from one's own century could be pronounced. The result of all this

<sup>1</sup> Chap. iv, p. 122.

self-conscious withdrawal from the industrial age was the hermit craftsman. Numbers of people retired from the world into remote parts of the country and started to make furniture by hand. Some of them were disciples of William Morris, some of them were just inept dabblers who were prepared to palm off any crudity in the shape of woodwork under the label of 'hand-made'. A few were artist-craftsmen of a high order, among them being such men as Ernest Gimson, Sydney Barnsley and Romney Green. A number of talented architects were at work influencing the form of modern furniture, and of these, Mr. C. F. A. Voysey was the great pioneer of what is now known as the modern movement in design.

William Morris began a great revival of craftsmanship which was almost lost in the wastes of mediaeval romanticism. In England his work spawned the cult of the antique, which fostered the growth and prosperity of the most fantastically ridiculous trade that has ever existed in any country, namely, the antique furniture and faking business. Abroad, William Morris was taken far more seriously, and in Sweden his work was such a source of inspiration that the great contemporary flowering of Sweden's arts and crafts, which has enabled that talented country to produce such exquisite things in furniture, textiles, metalwork and glass, and to promote so many effective partnerships between designers and manufacturers, may be attributed in part to Morris's influence.

The modern movement in architectural design which was preached in the nineties and the opening decade of the present century by such men as Adolf Loos, was activated by the work of Mr. C. F. A. Voysey, and by

that distinguished Scottish architect, the late C. R. Mackintosh. By many Continental architects and designers, and by our own discerning practitioners and critics of design, Mr. Voysey is regarded as the father of the true modern movement. Unfortunately for this country, the modern movement did not have a clear, uninterrupted development. It became complicated by all sorts of queer and distorted foreign ideas. George Walton, who died in December 1933, another of the pioneers of modern design in England, began his work in Glasgow in 1888, working among the founders of the Glasgow school of painters. In a letter to the *Architectural Review*, a few months before his death, he wrote: '... About 1892, while in Glasgow, C. R. Mackintosh followed, and our work was interesting the Dutch, and later the Austrian architects, and the type of work we were then doing would, I think, even to-day have been looked upon as modern, but unfortunately the movement, after being distorted and twisted, returned from Austria through Paris, and finished in *l'art nouveau*.'<sup>1</sup>

This new art was the special misfortune of original design in England. Its leering exuberance, its fantastic writhings, scared respectable people. It was hardly sobered down by the furniture trade, who borrowed its worst manifestations of ornament, misapplied them of course, and called the result the 'quaint' style. 'Quaint' indeed! Fortunately it did not survive; but it consolidated the reluctance of English people to accept new artistic experiments. The bright coiling branches and slithery leaves of new art decoration seemed so alien, so vividly ungenteel to minds respectably attuned to what

<sup>1</sup> July 1933.

were called 'furnishing colours', crimson, dingy green, snuffy brown; so dangerously undisciplined to eyes that had previously looked upon and found good the congested but indisputably realistic floral tributes of the wallpaper and furniture-fabric manufacturers; so casually flimsy for the thickly clothed bodies whose pompous curves has hitherto been supported by the dignities of mahogany, swollen with all the pride of obese turning. And yet fluid decoration had not been unknown in England before. There were impeccable precedents for naturalistic forms. Those chasing, curving vine-leaf friezes of early Tudor times; the streaming foliage of Gothic stone-work.<sup>1</sup> Even heart-shaped piercing is to be found in the back splats of country-made Georgian chairs occasionally.<sup>2</sup> But these things were forgotten; or perhaps they were never heard of by the late Victorians. People were only anxious to be relieved of the shouting, carnival vigour of this strange style. It went, and with it went all hope of encouragement or widespread patronage for original design.

Apart from the experiments of Ambrose Heal (now Sir Ambrose), hardly anything modern was being made in London in the opening of the twentieth century. Anybody who wanted furniture was on the look-out for 'bargains' in old things. There were honest and earnest attempts to recapture the 'charm' of Georgian and Stuart interiors. The word 'charm' was bandied about

<sup>1</sup> The Romano-British period is rather remote, but there is in the Reading Museum a mosaic pavement removed from Silchester (from house No. 2 Insula XIX, excavated 1898) that foreshadows the creepy-crawly tendencies of new art. In the outer border of this pavement there are long tendrils bearing leaves, each like a curly ace of spades. It might have been shown in the Paris Exhibition of 1900 as an entirely original design.

<sup>2</sup> See piercing on back splat of Windsor chair on Plate XI.

together with the word 'artistic' until both terms ceased to have any meaning in the English language. They have gone the way of 'quality', 'exclusive', and 'original'; words that have been applied to so many shoddy and disreputable things by traders that they are now devoid of significance. Presently the antique dealer contributed new descriptive terms, such as 'genuine' and 'restored'.

'I want to see your reproductive furniture', said the innocent client to the salesman in a New York store. Well might it be called 'reproductive', this stuff labelled 'antique'; and *The New Yorker* when it published that joke was more apt than perhaps its editors realised. The word 'restored' only came into current use when it was beginning to be obvious that the supply of antiques was not inexhaustible, and also it enabled furniture to breed as it were, as one can read very cheerfully in *Quinneys*, so that a couple of chairs could become a set of six by parting with a leg and a stretcher, an arm and a back splat, the missing pieces being made up with new parts, and the set of six could then be described as being genuine 'pieces' of antique workmanship. There was a fortune in the word 'restored', and showroom after showroom in London and the provinces was filled and emptied month by month and year by year, and into the homes of the credulous this crippled crowd of 'restored' chairs and tables and chests thrust aside for a quarter of a century the possibility of good contemporary work being encouraged by adequate patronage.

The furniture trade, seeing that antique furniture was 'all the go', started upon its own lamentable career of imitation. Avid of labels, it seized upon the standard descriptions of various periods. 'Jaco' stood impartially

for any watered-down machine-made copy of furniture constructed between 1600 and 1680. 'Queen Anne' was attached to anything that had cabriole legs. 'Chippendale' was the term generally applied to any furniture made of dark red wood, and in the low-grade branches of furniture production, 'Chippendale' was regarded as a colour almost exclusively. 'Sheraton' meant something thinner than 'Chippendale' in form, and a few shades lighter in colour. Anything that had rather a lot of carving or stamped composition ornament glued or nailed on to its surface and was splashed about with gold paint was called 'Louis'. The big furniture-making centres in England, High Wycombe, Shoreditch, Manchester and Barnstaple and in Scotland, Beith (in Ayrshire), were all busy turning out accurate and inaccurate copies of the period styles, and in that repellent branch of furniture production known in the trade as 'medium class goods' only caricatures were made by the factories, caricatures of noble things that English designers had once taken pride in creating.

Quite unjustly, the machine was blamed for all this. The term 'machine-made' became a term of abuse. But the machine was never given a chance to do its best. It was always under the control of uneducated men. It was never under the control or even under the occasional supervision of a designer. Since 1840 or thereabouts the designer has been the missing technician in British industry. Only to-day, owing largely to the influence of such bodies as the Design and Industries Association and the Royal Society of Arts, is industry waking up to the fact that the designer is as much a technician as the engineer, the electrician and the chemist.

But William Morris, with his honest disgust for

shoddiness, had turned away from machinery, and, all unconsciously, began a movement which was to delay the civilising of industry for at least half a century. The best effect of William Morris's work was his inspiration of certain young artist-craftsmen and architects like Ernest Gimson. To the work of such men as Gimson, Barnsley, A. Romney Green and, since the war, to Gordon Russell, we owe a big proportion of the original furniture design of the twentieth century. In the 'nineties and the Edwardian period, Mr. C. R. Ashbee was designing furniture and metalwork, also George Walton, and many architects were giving thought to the creation of furniture forms, including such designers as Mr. Baillie Scott, Mr. F. W. Troup, Mr. C. R. Mackintosh and later Sir Edwin Lutyens.

Ernest Gimson and Sydney Barnsley together gave vitality to all that was best in the ideas of William Morris. Gimson met Morris in 1884.<sup>1</sup> For twenty-five years Gimson lived and worked at Pinbury and Sapperton in Gloucestershire. He revived something that had been waning since the advent of machine production, namely, the ability of the craftsman to design for and with a material that he understood, a material for which he had respect, and, if he was an artist, a material for which he bore the most sincere love. The chapter contributed by Mr. A. H. Powell to the *Ernest Gimson Memorial Volume*, condenses in one paragraph the results of that work.

'At the first glance all was of an extraordinary interest. Then one saw the beauty of the work: the substance,

<sup>1</sup> This is the date given in the *Ernest Gimson Memorial Volume*. This book, entitled *Ernest Gimson, His Life and Work*, was published by Ernest Benn, Limited, London, and Basil Blackwell, Oxford, in 1924.

the development of the various woods, of the ivory, the silver, the brass, of inlays of coloured woods and shell. It was inevitable that you should find in the work now and then a humorous use of peculiar materials, an enjoyment of surprise; and for the work itself I have seen educated men and women, who might have been expected to behave differently, unable, short of actual laughter, to satisfy their delight in such a perfect union of good workmanship with happy thought.'

Gimson was a craftsman endowed with the ability of a designer. He was not just a designer who dabbled in handicraft and knew how to employ other craftsmen. It is important to recognise his ability as a designer, for it is sometimes supposed that an accomplished craftsman is by virtue of his manual dexterity a designer. The craftsman, left to his own common sense, may devise something that is fit for its purpose, but he may over-decorate it like any savage; he may be unaware of innumerable opportunities for refining the proportions of various members; he may achieve a solid straightforwardness, a rustic simplicity, but in the absence of a continuous tradition of furniture-making to nourish his invention and provide him with guiding precedents, he must improvise, and, unless he has the selective and inventive skill of a designer, his improvisations may be discords. By mastering the craft of woodworking, Gimson, the sensitive and accomplished designer, brought to furniture-making the individual genius it had lacked since the death of Sheraton. After Sheraton there had been no great names associated with English furniture. The supply of men with ideas disciplined by a craftsman's training had dried up: there were plenty of drawing-board men, and the Victorian age is grim

with the indiscretions of their taste. Sheraton was a craftsman before he started publishing books on design; Hepplewhite was a craftsman; so was Chippendale. Gimson's affinities with the traditional English craftsman are indisputable; and posterity will probably single out his name when it seeks for evidence of early twentieth-century ability in furniture design. But he did not follow the line of fashionable designers that ended with Sheraton. His work continued, unconsciously, the developments that had been suspended by the Restoration of Charles II.

He was only concerned with hand-craft methods. He took no assistance from the machine age. He felt that any compromise with mechanical production was impossible. 'Let machinery be honest', he said, 'and make its own machine-buildings and its own machine-furniture; let it make its chairs and tables of stamped aluminium if it likes: why not?'<sup>1</sup> So, aiming at a mastery of the traditional methods of woodworking, he gave to a largely uncaring world beautiful examples of original furniture. He made chairs with turned legs and rails and ladder-backs, and spindle-backs and rush-seats, displaying his ability for apt decoration; also cabinets and chests and sideboards in walnut and oak, with veneering of burr-elm, with inlays of holly and ebony, cherry, ivory, bone and mother-of-pearl. His chairs were of oak, ash, yew, walnut and elm. All the gifts of English wood, those riches of colour and marking, he used, reviving forgotten knowledge of the decorative quality of such materials as yew and elm; employing them with an ever-widening comprehension of their flexions, of their willingness to be coaxed into comely shapes when they

<sup>1</sup> Ernest Gimson, *His Life and Work*, p. 14.

were wisely chosen, part by part, for the work they had to do as components of a chair or a table.

There were no classic mouldings on Gimson's furniture; no trace of an architectural heritage from the Georgian age. He eased angles with chamfers. Cupboard doors were gently raised with fielded panels. He created individual pieces of furniture. The suite, which was originally a gracious invention, spoiled by the dull wits of the Victorian furniture trade, did not inspire him.

Gimson, by studying crafts that had survived a precarious existence in the nineteenth century, was able to recapture the natural aptitude of the English wood-worker for appropriate ornament. Craftsmen with a tradition behind them could be trusted to use decoration wisely; such wisdom, it may be repeated, does not come from executive skill alone. To-day the only wood-work that maintains a long tradition of ornamental treatment is that used in costers' barrows and farm carts. The painting of such barrows and carts, the shaping of their structural members, with the wood nicked and rounded and the angles chamfered, illustrate pre-Georgian decorative survivals.

Sydney Barnsley was a designer and maker of furniture of the same school as Gimson. It is difficult to avoid the use of terms such as 'school' in describing the work of a number of individual designers who were solving problems and practising crafts in different parts of England during the first two decades of this century. What they achieved was virtually a new start for hand-craft in this country. The lesser men in this movement produced simple crudities which suggested the bleak forms of the American 'Mission' furniture, bare and solid wooden shapes, unsoftened by any respect for visual comfort,

primitive and profoundly unimaginative. From this sort of furniture arose the 'cottage' style, which ran its course in pre-war days and continued after the war with certain concessions made to a desire for 'colourful' gaiety. Gimson richly developed the best that was in Morris's teaching, and ultimately his work slightly stirred the ideas of the furniture trade, for, some years after his death, several manufacturers experimented with simple oak furniture that was more sophisticated than the cottage style and which bore traceable resemblances to some of Gimson's designs.

Gordon Russell, who began making furniture of original design after the war, had the same profound knowledge of wood, and the same respect and sympathy for it that Gimson had; and his earlier work displayed many of the characteristics of the earlier school of twentieth-century hand craft. But Gordon Russell, unlike Gimson, made many experiments in the association of hand-craft and machine-craft, and his furniture is now the product of machinery intelligently combined with hand craft, the machine doing the job best suited to it, reserving for the hands of craftsmen those tasks in which their skill can be used most fruitfully.

Gimson and Barnsley and other craftsmen worked outside the furniture trade. Few furniture manufacturers had ever heard of their names. Experiments and research work done in furniture design have been done outside the furniture trade with very few exceptions. The most brilliant exception is Sir Ambrose Heal. It is difficult to assess the extent of the influence his furniture designs have had upon contemporary taste; but there can be no question that it has been widespread and has helped to educate English taste by demonstrating the

virtues of simplicity, and the attractiveness of freedom from complication both in the form of furniture and the nature of interior decoration. Early Heal designs at the beginning of the century are in the Morris tradition, indicating sometimes the impress of Mr. Voysey's ideas, as indeed did most of the original furniture of that time; but for twenty-five years the designs of Sir Ambrose have been illustrating how walnut and mahogany and oak can be used for making pieces of furniture which have all the formal beauty of eighteenth-century designs but without their architectural conventions, and without ever succumbing, as the Georgian designers sometimes did, to the blandishments of rococo ideas.

Furniture design under the artist-craftsmen of the twentieth century has preserved upon a small scale the original genius of the English woodworker. A large proportion of the skill of English craftsmen has been given either to the meticulous copying of antique models by hand, or to the swifter and shoddier imitation of them by machine-craft. Nearly always when you go into a factory and talk to the men who are in control of machines, who are directing production in different shops and who are working with some understanding of their material, you discover that those men are so much better than the jobs they are doing. There is so much pride in good workmanship that wastes its nobility upon unworthy things in hundreds of English factories. Only rarely, when industrial production is directed by a designer, can the output of a woodworking factory be worthy of the peculiar and intensely national gifts of the operatives. The interest which was once concentrated on the object that was made is now diverted in the factory to the means of producing the object.

The process of production is more important than the product even as selling has become more important than production. A civilisation in which means tend to obscure or depreciate the significance of ends is seriously and perhaps fatally ill.

The artist-craftsmen have to their credit not only the preservation of hand-craft but the creation of an authentic twentieth-century style. Their work falls broadly into two categories: the Gimson school, which continues the English tradition from the mid-seventeenth century, and the school of design of which Sir Ambrose Heal is the chief exponent, which continues English tradition from the point where it was interrupted after the English Empire period. The second school has affinities with the first. Neither of them represent a conscious attempt to continue tradition. Both schools are progressive and have advanced beyond the limits of traditional materials and have made attractive experiments with the new materials.

'Concrete, metal, glass and plywood are the "big four" of modern architecture', said Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, R.A., President of the Royal Institute of British Architects, in an address to students, and he added a warning: 'but unthinking use of these materials for purposes for which they are unsuited—glass walls, glass and stone furniture, and stunts of this kind—should be carefully guarded against.'<sup>1</sup>

Designers and critics who are still intoxicated with the novelty of the modern movement in architecture and of those new materials are inclined to dismiss the work of the artist-craftsman, believing it to be 'out of the movement'. But although some architects may be pro-

<sup>1</sup> Given before the R.I.B.A., 22nd January 1934.

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viding for us houses and flats with rooms admirably planned and provided with fitments to ease our lives and curb our nascent untidiness, as human beings we may find ourselves occasionally in rebellion. We may weary of ordered, standardised spaces with their mechanistic equipment, and may insist on annulling their bleakness with one exquisite hand-made thing, some work of an artist-craftsman like Gimson, to reassure us of our humanity.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE NEW MATERIALS AND THEIR EFFECT ON DESIGN

IT has been said of the ultra-modern young couples of to-day that if you drag a chromium-plated steel chair in front of them they'll follow it for miles. For some centuries now 'the devils of fashion', to borrow Mr. Frank Pick's winged phrase, have been beguiling people along odd paths, and the passionate willingness of the modish to be eccentric has at all times encouraged queer experiments in the form of the things they were prepared to live with. Are the clustering amorini on the cresting of a Charles II chair, or the designs Thomas Chippendale produced in some of his worst moments and which disfigure so many pages of *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*, better or sillier than the 'quaint' style of the 'nineties?

No age has had the monopoly of good or bad taste. We are just emerging from a period of bad taste, a period in which original ideas were numbed or smothered. Because copyism flourished under the rule of the antique dealers, we have ignored the character of contemporary materials. Nearly every other age has thankfully used good materials, when they came to hand. Walnut was welcomed. Mahogany was welcomed and immediately employed. Upholstery triumphantly commandeered every material, device and trick of stuff-

ing and springing that could make it more and more comfortable. But in furniture for the first quarter of this century we accepted without enquiry, and with a depressing unadventurousness, the materials that had been used for the previous three centuries without trying any of the bold experiments that were possible, and which are now being tried. At the moment chromium-plated tubular steel furniture is supposed to represent the last word in modernism. Perhaps, even now, as the chromium tends to flake or chip off, it is losing its appeal for earnestly modern people. But chairs of this design, as we have seen earlier, may represent an ancient structural principle. And in France in the 'seventies and 'eighties chairs of metal rods, with X-shaped underframes, and with backs and seats made of wire netting, were allowing frock-coated gentlemen and very frilly ladies to recline upon their gossamer fabric and be supported by their ductile frames.<sup>1</sup> That was an early use of new and unusual materials. English manufacturers in the nineteenth century, leaving the designer out of the business of course, were active in the production of cage-like bedsteads made of brass and enamelled iron rods, garnished with knobs and bosses and sickly reminiscences of acanthus ornament. Not that metal beds and chairs represent a new idea at all, or metal furniture for that matter. The Naples Museum has many examples of furniture in bronze removed from Pompeii and Herculaneum. But the distinctive thing about the furniture of metal that is made to-day is that it uses the material with ruthless logic. It shakes one out of conventional and accepted beliefs of what it is possible to support. In *South Wind* Norman Douglas describes

<sup>1</sup> See Fig. 1 on p. 3.

the excavation of pumice-stone, and one of the characters in the book comments on the spectacle of men and boys easily carrying aloft huge masses of this feather-weight material. ‘Light as foam. But who can believe it? The bearers move within a few feet of us, and yet it resembles the most ponderous limestone or granite. . . . To me, who know the capacity of human bone and muscle, these men are a daily miracle. They mock my notions of what is permissible. How hard it is, sometimes, to trust the evidence of one’s senses! How reluctantly the mind consents to reality!’<sup>1</sup>

It is just that feeling of outraged scale that the tubular steel chair gives to our eyes, when we see it supporting the weight of a fifteen-stone man. But the new materials for furniture-making keep on disturbing our sense of structural values. As usual this can be traced back to an architectural source, to Paxton’s Crystal Palace, in fact; one of the first modern buildings in Europe. There has been a structural revolution in architecture, and it is reflected, as architecture is always reflected, in every other department of design, and particularly in furniture. The structural revolution in architecture has destroyed the importance of the wall. Buildings used to be like crustaceans, with a hard external supporting shell. The wall was strong and thick and upheld the floors and roof. Now buildings have changed into vertebrates; they have a staunch internal skeleton of steel, and the walls support nothing, but clothe the steel skeleton like a skin. Modern patronage for architecture has almost consistently refused to recognise the fact of this revolution and to acknowledge its aesthetic consequences. In furniture we have copied the antique for

<sup>1</sup> Chap. 7.

the last twenty-five years. In building we have veneered the front of our magnificent steel skeletons with enormously expensive and wholly unimportant stone façades in the Judaeo-Roman style, maddeningly variegated with touches of Assyrian, Egyptian and badly mutilated Greek ornament. When we frankly acknowledge in architecture that the structural revolution has taken place, we get in London something like the *Daily Express* building in Fleet Street, or Mr. Joseph Emberton's Universal House, the offices of Beck and Pollitzer, Limited, on the south side of Southwark Bridge. These buildings interrupt the most casual man in the street, and they interrupt him in exactly the same way as a tubular steel chair interrupts him. Such buildings and chairs exemplify a ruthlessly logical use of appropriate materials.

At the beginning of the century the new art movement produced some stillborn experiments in metal furniture. It was all drawing-board stuff, unrelated to the material, and its sinuous, floreated lines could have been expressed equally well in butter. Except for such starkly utilitarian articles as filing cabinets and other office equipment, there were few serious attempts to create metal furniture until in the years immediately following the war this branch of design was revived by the modern movement. Germany, released from the taste of William II, who liked gilded carving of the *embonpoint* school, began to lead Europe in clean, vigorous design. (That was before design had been given political significance in Germany and the 'art of the left' was persecuted by sadistic boy-scouts.) Dramatic possibilities in metal were then discovered. Nickelled and chromium-plated steel and polished aluminium

came into alliance with yielding upholstery of leather and rubber, and chairs and couches appeared which were strictly metallic in character, and were as efficient as modern sanitary fittings, and, at first, just about as interesting. The crude ruthlessness of these beginnings has now been shed; tubular metal furniture has become more civilised, less insistent upon stark lines: its designers having made some acknowledgement to humanity. Chromium plating is not the only finish, nor steel the only metal for tubes: enamelled and oxidized finishes are available, and copper is enlarging the variety of materials.

At the opposite pole of aesthetic aspiration is the metal furniture that mass-production American minds have given to the United and uncritical States. Thin sheets of metal are stamped out to form bed heads and ends, and the sides, backs and doors of cupboards. These sheets are 'assembled', their edges and joints protected by strips of beading, and the proportions of wooden prototypes are followed. The result is a simple article of furniture which can be turned out by the million. Painted in plain colours, such things would at least earn the description of 'blameless', but treated as they nearly always are to imitate wood (something richly figured as a rule), they become under the dull hands of their makers just so many more unpleasant objects in a world already overcrowded with rubbish. The hero of Sinclair Lewis's depressing book, *The Man who knew Coolidge*, is in the office-equipment business, and he sings the song of metal furniture made to look like any real rich wood you fancy with the nauseating conviction that he is singing one of the finest songs in the world. It happens to be a very old song. In *Egyptian Decorative*

*Art*,<sup>1</sup> Sir W. M. Flinders Petrie, describing naturalistic decoration in Ancient Egypt, says: '. . . we may notice the base imitation of nature in copying the grain of wood, which we find done in the earliest times of the IVth dynasty, and continued down to the period of the Empire'.

Tubular steel furniture is part of the modern movement in architectural design and that movement has nothing to do with the 1925 Paris Exhibition of Decorative Art, an event still regarded as the latest expression of design by many people who ought to know better. Although the furniture-maker may no longer be directly under the control of the architect, as he was in the eighteenth century, the architect ultimately controls the form, size and capacity and character of all furniture, for he provides the accommodation for it, admits or denies the necessity for its existence. The efficiently equipped rooms of the modern Continental flats; their great expanses of glass and metal: their fitted cupboards that have already condemned the wardrobe to extinction even as competent plumbing condemned the washstand: the elimination of needless housework: all these spatial freedoms have come from the modern functionalist movement in architecture, as far in advance of its time, perhaps, as the furniture industry of England is behind its time.

More and more the architect is beginning to control the design of furniture. The work of such brilliant men as Wells Coates, Raymond M'Grath and Serge Chermayeff has already had an effect upon the form of this new furniture. And designers whose minds are attuned to the modern movement are working with such

<sup>1</sup> Second edition, 1920. P. 89.

materials as plywood, glass, steel and copper and nickel, and rubber and canvas, working out again the problems of comfort, which have been solved so well in the past, but working them out with contemporary materials. The result seems strange to our eyes at first. But strange only because we are accustomed to thinking of the use of materials in a militant way. H. G. Wells in describing one of his many Utopias has illuminated this reluctance to accept the functional consequences of an intelligent use of materials in dealing with the furnishing details of a room in the ideal civilisation he had created. He wrote: 'And the forms of everything were different, simpler and more graceful. On earth, he reflected, art was largely wit. The artist had a certain limited selection of obdurate materials and certain needs, and his work was a clever reconciliation of the obduracy and the necessity and of the idiosyncrasy of the substance to the aesthetic pre-conceptions of the human mind. How delightful, for example, was the earthly carpenter dealing cleverly with the grain and character of this wood or that. But here the artist had a limitless control of material, and that element of witty adaptation had gone out of his work. His data were the human mind and body. Everything in this little room was unobtrusively but perfectly convenient—and difficult to misuse.'<sup>1</sup>

What are these new materials, and how are they used? What, for example, is plywood? It is sometimes loosely described as three-ply, and is often regarded as a shoddy, cheap material used for putting in the backs of cabinets and wardrobes where solid wood might be too expensive. Plywood is a cheap material. But plywood represents a method of using wood in an entirely sound

<sup>1</sup> *Men Like Gods*, chap. viii.

and economical way. It employs the principle of the sandwich. A thin sheet of wood is cemented to another sheet that has the grain running in the opposite direction, and then there is a third sheet cemented to that, providing two outer sheets with the grain running in the same direction. This braces all three sheets and reduces the tendency of thin wood to warp and twist. These three sheets form three-ply wood. But there are four-ply and five-ply and six-ply, also a material known as 'laminboard', which consists of thin strips of wood cemented together to form one large sheet, and this sheet, built up of laminations, is faced on either side with thin sheets of wood, so that a very strong and almost completely un-warpable board is produced. Plywood and laminboard can be veneered with any type of decorative wood, mahogany, oak, walnut, sycamore and so forth. Plywood can also be faced with thin sheets of metal on either one or both sides, so that a material consisting of five sheets is produced: a metal face, then three sheets of wood, then another metal face. The metal faces are usually of galvanised steel, which can be painted; but they can be of aluminium, stainless steel, copper, bronze or monel metal, so that large sheets of rigid but light metal-faced material are available for furniture-making.

The type of architectural design made possible by the structural revolution has stimulated the invention of furniture designers who have emptied their minds of traditional prejudices. The process of emptying the mind of traditional prejudices does not imply that appreciation for the subtleties of proportion has to be jettisoned. 'Proportion is a due adjustment of the size of the different parts to each other and to the whole; on

this proper adjustment symmetry depends.' Thus, Marcus Vitruvius Pollio in the third book of his work on architecture.<sup>1</sup> This piece of wisdom can be remembered although it belongs to tradition. It is not a limiting law; it is an activating principle. A modern building of steel and concrete and glass can achieve nobility of proportion. Paxton's Crystal Palace is an example of such an achievement, and the factory built by Sir Owen Williams for Messrs. Boots at Nottingham is another. Both these buildings show the immense freedoms conferred upon architectural form by transparent materials. Furniture designers and a small section of the furniture industry are just beginning to experiment with the same materials. The glass ensemble designed by Mr. Oliver Hill, F.R.I.B.A., at the Exhibition of British Industrial Art in Relation to the Home, in July 1933, showed the exquisite forms that could be created from bent bottle-green polished plate-glass, 1 inch to  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inches thick.<sup>2</sup> The forms of the dressing-table, the glass couch and the glass stool seemed in their lucent transparency to float rather than to stand upon the glass floor of this particular exhibit. But those designs by Mr. Hill were exceptional and experimental. Glass has a number of promising uses in contemporary furniture-making. For two and a half centuries the furniture trade has been content to employ glass simply in the window or mirror sense. Cabinets and bookcases and bureau-bookcases have had glass fronts, little panes set in wooden glazing bars, and in the nineteenth century that singular abomination the mirror-fronted wardrobe was invented. If glass was used in any other way it was employed as a

<sup>1</sup> Gwilt's translation.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Architectural Review*, July 1933, pp. 24, 25.

protective covering for some fine piece of wood. Often an antique dining-table would remind its possessors that it was almost a museum piece, by having a glass top to preserve its figuring and patina from the coarse contacts incidental to everyday use. That glass could be used as an independent material was not generally recognised until recently. Now tables with plate-glass tops can be supported by a pair of glass cylinders or by a light framework of steel or copper tubes. Plate-glass is made in a number of soft and pleasant tints. Very pale shades of pink and blue can give it a decorative quality that can be developed by the judicious use of artificial lighting. Glass is not the brittle, fragile thing that it used to be. There is a material known as armour-plate glass, which is plate-glass subjected to a process which enables it to bend and to take heavy weights and blows, and to resist high temperatures. When tried beyond its tested strength, it disintegrates, breaking up into small, powdery crystals, and not into dangerous jagged pieces and splinters. When one sees a piece of armour-plate glass being tested by one or more men standing on a thin sheet of it, which curves but does not break beneath their weight, it has a magical air that is a little disturbing. It demands such a complete reversal of our traditional idea of glass. Armour-plate should not be confused with reinforced glass, which is plate-glass with sheets of copper wire rolled into the centre of it, the wire being electrically welded at its intersections and forming a pattern of small squares.<sup>1</sup> This type of glass does not bend, but it stars instead of flying to pieces when struck by some heavy object. Glass can be subjected to all kinds of decorative treatments such as sand-

<sup>1</sup> Known under the trade name of 'Georgian' wired glass.

blasting, acid-etching, silvering, colour-spraying and so forth.

Although most of these new furniture-making materials have so far been used for exotic cocktail bars, night-clubs, and flats designed to impress gossip writers, a more extensive employment of their peculiar qualities may be anticipated, especially in view of their decorative relevance to the sort of background the modern architect is supplying. An extension of the use of plywood may bring into use a novel and interesting assembly of furniture forms, and the work of such designers as the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto have disproved the assertion, so often made, that modern materials tie designers down to a few bleak and simple forms.

But where is the craftsman coming in? Where is the man who delights to conquer materials, and to know their ways and their humours and all their array of subtleties, to find employment? It is true that the craftsman has not always been independent. As we have seen, he lost most of his so-called 'independence' towards the end of the seventeenth century, and he only regained an unsatisfactory and vicarious independence in the present century. Throughout the Georgian age he was working, if not under the direction of the architect, certainly under the influence and control of the architect's ideas. When the architect lost that control and it was assumed by the manufacturer and the trader, the craftsman disappeared or became a complete slave to the ill-taste of his employers. But what will happen to him when designs that are expressly made for machine production are created by architects and other capable designers? Designs which will deal in standard units

and with standardised materials, and which are just able specifications for the assembling of so much metal tubing, plywood and glass and rubber? The mechanic who assembles these things is not a craftsman. The man who controls the machine that cements sheets of wood face to face in the process of plywood manufacture is not a craftsman. The creative craftsman, the follower of William Morris, who made furniture from the traditional materials in original forms, does not come into this picture at all. It is conceivable that all furniture-making will in time be on the same basis as all big-scale building is to-day. At the present time, the erection of a big building no longer requires the individual creative skill of a large number of hand-craftsmen. The steel goes up, and the girders are slung into place by gigantic cranes and are bolted together by automatic riveters. There is a lot of incidental highly skilled work in the erection of these steel skeletons. To see the rivets being made red-hot in a little portable forge on a platform high up among the rising girders, and to see a riveter pick them out of the glowing fire with tongs and toss them one by one across gulfs twenty or more feet wide to the place where they are wanted for linking the girders, and to see them caught unfailingly in a bucket of sand, nipped out and driven in with the automatic riveter, is to witness an exhibition of considerable skill; skill in the service of machines; but skill only in the *handling* of things whose form is ordained by standardisation. Perhaps furniture-making in the future will only be able to command such incidental exhibitions of skill in handling. Perhaps the old human desire to fashion and shape things will be too strong for standardisation. Perhaps in a world of standardised materials we

shall gain all the decorative relief that we need from highly individualised products, from the work of artist-craftsmen who design and make things with their own hands. When standardised materials are used with imagination they do not produce monotony. All sorts of materials have now been standardised in various units. This is not a new idea. Bricks have been standardised for centuries.

The most exciting and interesting furniture will be designed when artist-craftsmen who have hitherto been using traditional materials turn their attention to the new materials. Their inventiveness may be hampered by our lack of social graces, for manners or the absence of them have always affected the form of furniture.

The collapse of manners has brought us nearer and nearer the floor. The lounging habits deplored by that elegant diehard, Captain Orlando Sabertash, nearly a hundred years ago have not been checked.<sup>1</sup> We have slipped into attitudes which an eighteenth-century gentleman would, if charitably minded, regard as the stigmata of spinal weakness. Not only do we lounge; we sprawl, curl up, squat and perch on anything and everything; on cushions flung down on the floor, on the arms of easy-chairs, on hassocks. To accommodate these habits chairs and divans and settees have crept nearer and nearer the floor. While the arms of easy-chairs have broadened to allow the percher to settle, the legs are now merely vestigial; often the underside of an upholstered chair seat rests on castors. There are chairs with seats that unfold and change an easy-chair into a legless lounge, raised above the floor level only by the depth of the cushions.

<sup>1</sup> See quotation on p. 28.

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The fireplace has altered to match our change of level. It no longer stands in a basket or upon raised bars: it burns directly on a slightly elevated back hearth. Tall pieces of furniture give place to low horizontal cabinets and bookcases. There is something Japanese about this conception of scale; and if indoor life is lived at or very near the floor level, ideas about the convenience and proportion of furniture must change. Japanese furnishing attains its formal harmonies because tradition has educated the eyes of Japanese ladies and gentlemen to appreciate shapes from a certain level. We have shambled casually into a queer, un-Western habit, and perhaps because of this careless change of level many modern designers are trying unconsciously to adjust the furniture they invent to suit this invertebrate phase of manners.

Materials and manners mould furniture design. It is unfortunate that at the beginning of the second third of the twentieth century materials have seldom been more stimulating at a time when manners are so undignified.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE PATIENT ART OF BUYING FURNITURE

PATIENCE is the chief requirement of those who want to buy furniture to-day. If you want to buy genuine old furniture, don't imagine that a few superficial tips about the position worm-holes should occupy are sufficient to save you from the gangsters of the antique racket. Worm-eaten wood is often used for patching up some crippled chair or table, or is even used shamelessly side by side with new wood, for that label 'restored' can cover practically anything—even a bureau-bookcase built around a single hinge of antique origin. It is just as well to be suspicious, if not outspokenly rude, when you are assured that a piece of furniture is 'genuine' when you can see the channelling of the galleries made by the larvae of the timber beetle exposed on the surface of the article. The furniture beetle burrows into wood, and its entrances and exits are indicated by little pin-prick holes, and if the wood is badly attacked those holes will emit fine dust when tapped. Only when worm-eaten wood is cut are the internal galleries revealed.

If you have an affection for the shape of things designed in the past, then you should do your buying in the light of your knowledge of design. You will then discover that the 'red-hot fake' is seldom a thing of simple beauty and clean line. It is deliberately *odd*, rare

because it is eccentric; its deceit is overdone; it is intended to cheat a collector rather than to delight a connoisseur of design. It will frequently be described with a cynicism that is perhaps unintentional as a 'collector's piece'.

Antique furniture of the country-made type is often cheaper to buy to-day than modern furniture; and the large, ornate things of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are practically unsaleable because they are too big for modern rooms and nobody wants them. But some of the chests and cabinets of that period are beautiful, and they languish in hundreds of show-rooms, awaiting the return of that prodigal spender—the American. Beware of ye olde shoppes of cathedral cities: the fakes that lurk below the clusters of warming-pans are anything from 50 per cent to 250 per cent dearer than in London, while the genuine antiques, such as they are, are usually overpriced. The last hope of the bargain-hunter lies in suburban second-hand furniture shops, where odd pieces of old furniture sometimes turn up and are sold at the prices asked for the normal rubbish that litters such places. If you are just a casual purchaser of old furniture, or furniture of antique design, and manage to escape the intense emotions of what should perhaps be called a *pukka* collector, your self-esteem may remain unwounded for years; but it may suffer if and when you indulge in the pleasures of modern furnishing. You may even observe a faint flavour of the grave about your treasures then. If they are old you may realise that you are not really their owner: they are owning you—for a time. Then you should get some contemporary work to rub shoulders with them. Unless you own enormous rooms and can

reproduce therein, with or without antique designs, the dignities of furnishing in the grand manner, you may make with comfortable associations of things old and new the best of both possible worlds.

The prices of old furniture fluctuate so greatly, and any attempt to discuss costs must be hedged about with so many reservations, that little practical guidance in this difficult and disappointing matter can be given. For instance, a large, late sixteenth-century eight-legged table of the type usually misnamed refectory, might have fetched anything between £900 and £1200 before the war or immediately after it during the peak of the American buying period. Now such a table might fetch £600, if it could be sold at all. Five years ago the writer made some notes on the cost of old furniture; not in connection with elaborate examples, 'collector's pieces' or 'museum pieces'; but concerning the simpler types that have been less tempting to furniture forgers. These notes (from chapter iii of *Modern Home Furnishing*) ran thus:

'If you look for old country-made things you will find that chairs can generally be acquired inexpensively. Even the leather-seated and leather-backed chairs of the Commonwealth are occasionally in the market for a few pounds apiece. But far commoner and far cheaper are the ladder-backed and spindle-backed chairs, rush-seated, and with turned legs and underframing, made in oak, ash, cherrywood and elm. With the wood deeply toned and the rushing well preserved they can be bought for as little as 15s. or £1 : 5s. each, although £1 : 15s. or £2 to £2 : 10s. would be fair prices. Chairs in oak and elm that imitate the fashionable shapes that were made in walnut and mahogany during the eighteenth

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century are worth having, for they are not so much imitations as pleasant simplifications of luxurious designs made by country craftsmen; sometimes sets of half a dozen will fetch anything from £8 to £15 or £20. Prices vary considerably, and it is practically impossible to lay down what this or that type of furniture should fetch without actually seeing the furniture concerned. For instance, with oak gate-leg tables made during the latter half of the seventeenth century the price may range from £6 to £35 or £40. The table may be extensively "made-up"—that is to say, its framing and some of its legs may be original, but it has been "restored", and a fresh leg added here and there and a new top have granted it a fresh lease of life. If it has been restored with skill it will be just as satisfying in use (except to ultra-romantic people) as an entirely genuine antique. Its past history affects its price. Its size and design and any peculiarity of shape may again affect its price; but, to give a specific example, a double gate-leg table with simple turned legs, the top with both leaves extended measuring about five feet in length, would be reasonably priced at £12. If the legs were bobbin-turned instead of plain the price would increase by £3 or £4, and the highly decorative "barley-sugar" twist would imply a further increase. It must be understood that the figures quoted are only approximate. There has been such a prolonged craze for old oak that even the most inferior pieces fetch high prices. Genuine antiques of "The Age of Walnut" are usually costly. . . . Mahogany furniture is far easier to acquire. Unless you can search exhaustively and pay tremendously it is impossible to purchase any piece of furniture that can be traced back to the workshop of any of the famous

eighteenth-century makers; but although you cannot buy without vast expenditure the furniture that came from Chippendale's shop in St. Martin's Lane it is relatively easy to buy a set of dining-room chairs made in oak or mahogany "in the Chippendale manner" by a country contemporary of the great craftsman for a matter of £15 or £20 the half-dozen. They will be plain renderings, what is known as "Cottage Chippendale", but they will be satisfying to the eye. Hepplewhite and Sheraton had their "Cottage" equivalents.

When you begin trying to buy modern furniture you will need even greater reserves of patience than when the dealers are telling you the old, old story. At least the dealers know something about furniture, know something of the meaning of style and character. But the average retail furnisher, or head of the furniture section of a big departmental store, is not even passively ignorant of design; he is aggressively ignorant. He thrusts his prejudices at you. And his prejudices are those of the people Mr. J. B. Priestley writes about with such zest, people who live either rather mildewed lives in shabby suburbs or who are heartily localised in one-horse industrial hells in the Midlands, people whose ideas favour turgid ostentation in furnishing: 'Ee, lad, ah likes good stoof thick!' *The retail furniture buyer chooses what the public shall buy.* He says he knows what the public wants. He knows what he fancies himself, and his lack of education and taste obstruct every experiment that furniture manufacturers make. Not that they make many.

The question has often been asked: What would Chippendale do if he were alive to-day: would his gifts get a chance?

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Every manufacturer knows the answer to that. Chippendale would be told by the retail buyer that his work wasn't what the public wanted. 'Now look here, Chippendale, old man,' the buyer would say, 'this stuff won't do at all. It isn't a bit like the stuff that went so well last year. You know, people won't stand for this sort of thing. A man with my experience——,' etc.

And to back up the retail buyer, whose only concern is to shift stock as quickly as possible, all the powers of modern persuasion are commanded by the establishment he serves. An essential preliminary to any shopping expedition, whether to buy furniture or any other products of modern industry, should be the reading of a disturbing little book entitled *Culture and Environment*.<sup>1</sup> The writing of a book that analysed the forces of persuasion so ably could only have been possible in an age when the selling of goods has become so vastly more important than the goods themselves. The great problem of the twentieth century is the problem of distribution, the economists insist on telling us. Shift your stock. Salvation through selling. If the furniture falls to pieces as the last instalment falls due, so much the better; more stock can be shifted to replace the dismembered and dishonoured wreckage. The retailer regards you not as a customer, a person to be served and studied, but as an outlet for sales, representing so much space into which stock can be shifted. Beware of him. He has even more junk to get rid of than the antique dealer.

Remember all the time what is happening behind the scenes. The chiefs of the retail establishments order their departmental buyers to buy what will sell. But

<sup>1</sup> By F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson. It is concerned with the training of critical awareness. Published in 1933 by Chatto and Windus.

even this prudent mandate is rather a gamble. The Englishman's house is still his castle, and he and his wife have queer streaks of individual adventurousness in them regarding the things they may put into it, plus an abundance of passionate obstinacy (called 'knowing what they like'), and thus they render any mortal forecast of their purchasing inclinations impossible. So the trade buyer fills up acres and acres of deep carpeted showrooms with 'Jaco' suites, and pseudo-Chippendale, pseudo-Adam and pseudo-Sheraton. He too knows what he likes, and he knows he doesn't like experiments. Besides, they may affect his departmental profits, and the most sinister figure in modern industry, the accountant, is always cracking the whip in the background, and muttering: 'Figures must be kept up!'

How can good design emerge from a business that is fuddled with finance to such an extent that its power of creating anything has almost departed? The retailer's reactionary policy in design is buttressed by the belief that the employment of a studio of copyist hacks, who design period furnishing schemes and encourage the departments to go on buying mock-period furniture, glass and fabrics, is an adequate concession to this unrestful art business. 'Safety first!' cry the little Napoleons of commerce. 'We must make sure of the bread-and-butter stuff, gentlemen—it is hardly practical to discuss ideals at this meeting.' And progress is carried unanimously from the board room. As we have seen, the capable designer in wood and metal and pottery is compelled under modern conditions to become a solitary craftsman, working out his own salvation (or bankruptcy) and inevitably losing touch with the life and needs of his own time. The country attracts him and

away he goes to the Cotswolds or the Chilterns or the Sussex Downs, and he is so deeply concerned with the making of things that he forgets all about selling them. There is no proper outlet for his work, except a few miserably amateurish exhibitions where his really competent productions are shown side by side with hand-embroidered slippers, hand-painted lampshades and similar trash. He ought to be associated with some manufacturer in a consultancy capacity; he ought to be producing models and supervising the design of things that are made by machine-craft in the factory; but how can the manufacturer employ him and get the benefit of his creative powers if the retail stores departmental buyer, with his directors' battle-cry of 'safety first' ringing in his ears, runs in terror from really creative design? We are always brought back to those earnest guardians of the balance-sheet, the directors of the great retailing houses. Quite properly they safeguard the interests of their shareholders, but who can convince them that an effective collaboration with capable designers, who could direct the taste of some of their departments and enrich the contents of their showrooms with fresh and living ideas, would be an experiment worth making, and one that might have a most invigorating effect upon dividends? Faith and courage are needed for such an experiment, and the men who control the destinies of the big stores have never lacked either in tackling other problems of development. Meanwhile they are, perhaps unconsciously, repressing a proper function of their magnificent shops, a function that is not only recognised but profitably exploited in Sweden and France (and in pre-Hitler Germany), where artists and craftsmen are in active and lucrative partnership with business.

Denied even the prospect of such partnership, the English artist-craftsman either becomes a disgruntled hermit relying on the chance patronage of the discriminating rich, or else he tries, perhaps in company with other craftsmen, to organise his work, to form a guild or a craft colony. This is generally unsuccessful, because the organisers are inclined to pride themselves on their ignorance of business, and go blithely on their way, ignoring such vital matters as costing, so that the selling prices of the things they make are sometimes far below the production cost, and sometimes so far in advance of the manifest worth of the goods that nobody can afford to buy them. This makes the buying of individual hand-made modern furniture as great a gamble as bargain-hunting for antiques. Occasionally a designer will study the problem of marketing his work seriously and intelligently, and thereby he gets involved in the maze of costing and selling so that he has no time left for designing anything.

With proper financial backing and under the direction of skilled organisers, a group of designers could produce furniture, fabrics and pottery that were vigorously alive and not impossibly expensive. If any of the big stores financed such an experiment and advertised the fact, they would gain prestige and arouse public interest in an original way. The expression of such practical concern for the vitality of the arts and crafts of this country might commend itself to business in the first place as a stunt; but it might conceivably become the real solution to the problem of the designer's contact with industry, and it would add to the credit of the establishment that first started it, and also figure on the credit side of its balance-sheet. A few tentative collabora-

tions of this nature have already been tried out by some intelligent retailers. They have not been unsuccessful.

Meanwhile you have to search in the wilderness of the average retailer's showrooms for tolerable furniture. A little exists, and anything the salesman describes to you as modern (or 'modernistic') is apt to bear the scars of the 1925 Paris Exhibition on its surface. (The furniture trade finds it so difficult to forget that highly decorative event.)

It is easy to enumerate the fundamentally undesirable qualities of furniture. No surface should be defaced with gummy-looking stains or polishes. Dark-stained oak or mahogany or walnut is to be avoided. The salesman will tell you it is an 'antique finish'. Be kind to him: he is usually quite ignorant of the enormities that fall from his lips, for he drifted into 'the sticks' (as the furniture department used to be called) without any preparation for his responsibilities, without any knowledge of design, and activated only by a desire to please and to pocket his  $\frac{1}{2}$ , 1,  $1\frac{1}{2}$ , 2 or  $2\frac{1}{2}$  per cent commission on sales. Ask for oak wax-polished or weathered or limed. Ask for wax-polished mahogany. You may get what you want with oak finishes, but mahogany is nearly always varnished out of its beautiful existence. Insist on an unfaked finish, and, even if it means waiting for what you want, it will be worth waiting for, and will be all the better for its honest presentation of the natural beauty of the wood you have chosen.

Investigate all joints. Every piece of ornament applied on the surface of a cabinet or wardrobe or bookcase may conceal the crime of carelessness. Avoid applied ornament. *Simple furniture must be well made.* Mistakes can't

be covered up with superficial decoration. Apart from that, applied ornament that expresses the taste of the furniture manufacturer trying to please the retail buyer is generally unspeakable.

Look all round a piece of furniture, and underneath and on top of it too. Look particularly at the backs and tops of wardrobes. Don't be perturbed if you see plywood used for the backs of chests and wardrobes. It is a good, light material; but it must be properly used: not tacked on to the frame with its edges unprotected. If there are little wedges of paper or wood underneath the feet of any piece of furniture, look the salesman in the eye and ask why they are there. You may then learn that the showroom floor is uneven, just at that place; so have the piece moved to an even place and see if it still rocks on its feet.

See that every drawer runs easily, and that cupboard doors swing shut. Take each drawer out, look underneath it, and see the jointing at the angles is not slipshod and clumsy. Refuse to have anything to do with tables and chairs whose legs are unduly thin or fat: such deformities are produced by the inept use of wood-working machinery.

Some time ago the writer listened to a discussion between some intelligent and critical people about the buying of furniture. There were half a dozen of us, representing as many professions, and after arguing about houses and the future of domestic architecture we found that, with the exception of the lawyer of the party, who collected old furniture, we all agreed that the chief difficulty in furnishing is the process of buying the actual chairs, tables and beds.

It was the artist who put her finger on the great

## THE PATIENT ART OF BUYING FURNITURE

weakness of the buying public. She said, with the harsh lucidity that some of us occasionally found rather trying:

'Most people buy things blind when they go into a furniture shop. They don't know what they want; and if they have the rudiments of good taste and they go into an ordinary retail furnisher's shop they can only think of what they don't want, and never could want unless they happened to be looking for furniture to use in a play where all the scenes were in an aspidistra-ridden boarding-house. And if they apply to the salesman for help, what happens? They ask for taste and are given a style. The tragedy is that they don't know themselves how to judge the quality of furniture, either in design or in workmanship.'

'Things were very different in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,' began the antiquarian lawyer; 'everyone could appraise good workmanship then. In this infernal mechanical age——'

The architect interrupted him and said:

'If you're only going to contribute your usual brand of anti-machinery abuse to this discussion, I suggest that you go and make yourself comfortable in another room with Butler's *Erewhon*, or some picturesque glorification of the Middle Ages by Cobbett. We shall only irritate you, because all of us, being clear-headed about these matters, realise that we must encourage the intelligent use of machinery. Machinery can turn out beautiful and useful things when it's used intelligently: machine-made furniture can be very satisfying when it's simple, and isn't trying to pretend that it was made by hand after a seventeenth-century model. The reason why most people can't judge good and bad workmanship in

furniture, is because they will not apply the elementary rules of common sense to the matter. A woman when she buys a hat pays some attention, I suppose, to its design in relation to the shape of her face and head and the general arrangement of her features. She also displays interest in the texture of the material and its colour. But when she buys a piece of furniture, does she always think of its shape and general design in relation to her other furniture and the existing and unalterable proportions and features of the room in which it will appear? Is she as interested in the texture and colour of the finish as she is in the ornamental trimmings and so-called style of the piece?

The lady doctor said it was a pity he always imagined a typical Victorian woman going shopping. The vapid, fashionable creature who had been taught to regard independent thought and indecency as synonymous, and criticism of anything that was established as most unladylike. ‘The real trouble is this,’ she said. ‘There are plenty of people who have ideas about furniture, and would like to have real adventures in furnishing that would bring interest into their homes, but they’re thwarted by the furniture salesman. Naturally they go to furnishers. If you are furnishing a house your first idea is to get in touch with the tradesmen who have made furnishing their special business. What happens?’

‘I’ll tell you,’ said the artist. ‘Your whole attention is turned from the goods you want to buy to the way you can buy them. The “easiness” of the terms, or whatever the phrase is; and the salesman can only talk about the price of the goods, or their popularity. You know the sort of stuff: “We’ve a great demand for this type of

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furniture just now, madam. A bargain too, only——” whatever the price may be.’

‘I should like to see a pontifical curse pronounced on that word “bargain”,’ said the architect. ‘It loads more junk on to people than anything else, and *you*—he turned accusingly upon the advertising expert—‘are responsible for robbing this word of its meaning, and making it cover a multitude of lies with its plausible sound.’

‘Advertising that tells lies is bad advertising, not only morally but commercially,’ protested the advertising expert. ‘If you lie or exaggerate about the goods you’ve got to sell, you shake the confidence of the public and spoil your market.’

‘That piece of obvious common sense doesn’t seem to come in for general recognition,’ said the lawyer.

‘Of course it doesn’t,’ said the advertising expert. ‘We may be a nation of shopkeepers, but possession or control of a shop doesn’t mean that we know all there is to be known about selling our goods, consequently goods are not always described honestly——’

‘For example,’ said the architect, ‘when I see an advertisement for a bedroom suite consisting of a wardrobe, a chest of drawers and a dressing-table, described as a bargain, solid oak, fine quality, well-made, exceptional offer, and the price is somewhere in the neighbourhood of £10 or £12, I know that somebody has committed a lie to print, and a silly lie at that. If you dissect that description you expose the utter fatuity of the claims it makes.’

‘Yes, but people in general don’t know enough about furniture, apart from the appearance of the outside of it,

to follow up that advertised description by a critical examination of the goods,' objected the artist. 'Somebody ought to write a guide called "How to buy Furniture in Spite of the Salesman".'

'The application of ordinary common sense is neglected,' was the architect's pronouncement. He suggested that if you confronted any man or woman with a piece of bad furniture, say a wardrobe, claiming fine workmanship, good material and superlative finish, and asked them to detect such manifest lying, they would, if normally intelligent, have little difficulty in exercising critical judgement. Apart from the gummy, over-ornamented surface of the wardrobe, the drawers in the base would run badly. The handles on drawers and door would betray a flimsiness and roughness of finish. Close examination of the beaded ornament that twiddled over the joints of the framework (to cover up warning gaps) would reveal that it was of composition, glued on and stained to resemble wood. The whole surface of the wardrobe would be covered with this muck, ready to chip and peel off in the course of wear and tear and changing temperature, eventually to disclose the ill-made carcase, with its joints opening, its panels warping and twisting in their flimsy frames.

'Well, why don't people look for those sort of things?' demanded the artist.

'Because, as you said just now, they buy blind,' the architect replied. 'If they do ask questions about quality, the furniture salesman, nine times out of ten, is too ignorant of that side of his job to be able to answer them. The salesman to-day is not so much an expert in the goods he is trying to sell, as an expert in the handling of customers. He is concerned with the discovery of lines

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that will become "best-sellers". So he appeals to the purse only——'

'And injects the bargain virus,' said the artist, 'which kills criticism as effectually as fashions and styles.'

'What's going to be done about it?' asked the lady doctor. 'No salesman can sell me anything I don't want, and I find it incredibly difficult to get what I really want when I happen to be buying anything concerned with furnishing—an honourable exception for furnishing fabrics though.'

'We should plan a campaign of rebellion against the conventions of salesmanship,' said the architect. 'We should make taste easy as well as terms.'

'Why not?' asked the artist. 'After all, there's nothing occult about taste. Begin with a background of common sense——'

'And "fitness for purpose",' interjected the architect.

'Exactly,' she agreed, 'and you would get a hundred bright and comfortable and restful homes where now you have one.'

'And muddle and bad workmanship would perish from the hearth,' added the architect.

There are a few intelligent retail furnishers. For obvious reasons a list of them cannot be included in this book. And because the law of libel protects lazy and incompetent people from public criticism, the firms cannot be named who perpetuate the sterile taste of their professional buyers with all the powers of modern commercial organisation. But plenty of patience and an educated eye for good proportion and a respect for common sense will guide you to the right shops. Reliable information regarding the whereabouts of modern

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furniture designers and their work can always be obtained from organisations like the Design and Industries Association,<sup>1</sup> and the best contemporary work is illustrated in such periodicals as *The Architectural Review*, *Design for To-day* (the official organ of the Design and Industries Association), *The Studio*, *Country Life* (whose proprietors were instrumental in promoting the Exhibition of British Industrial Art in Relation to the Home which was held in London in 1933) and annually in *The Studio Year Book of Decorative Art*.

It is the responsibility of the intelligent public to improve the character of the retail furnisher. Until people with independent minds and educated judgement insist on getting what they want and on seeing the sort of furniture they know progressive designers are making, the rubbish that is foisted upon the undiscriminating will continue to be offered to them by that anonymous arbiter of taste, the retail buyer.

<sup>1</sup> London office at 6 Queen Square, Bloomsbury, W.C.1. There are branches at Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol and Northampton.

## CHAPTER X

### BOOKS ABOUT FURNITURE AND DESIGN

If you have read as far as this chapter and still feel that you *must* collect old furniture, then there are many books which will help you to collect with more confidence. But if some of the preceding chapters have suggested that contemporary furniture design may be worth attention, then there are books which help you to observe and compare and seek out the work of to-day.

Those about to become collectors, and who wish to obtain a comprehensive idea of their peculiar responsibilities, are recommended to read *The Gentle Art of Faking Furniture* by Mr. Herbert Cescinsky. In twenty-one chapters he gives the facts about the supply of antique furniture, the production and recognition of fakes, and what is in effect a miniature history of English furniture-making. Therein he reveals not only the commercial exploitation of deceit, but the tragedy of misdirected patronage, which has fattened the dealer, obscured the designer, prostituted the craftsman, and turned men who might have become intelligent connoisseurs of living design into mere collectors of souvenirs from the past.

For example, we learn that the late Lord Leverhulme, 'who, considering the enormous amount of furniture which he bought (he had three or four great houses

simply packed with pieces), seemed to have had a positive genius for buying fakes. . . . We learn a few facts about the contribution collectors as a class have made to the accepted procedure of faking. We are told that the effect produced ‘by a vile so-called “antique shading” of the surface or by a glass papering which leaves the bare wood exposed through its stain, known in the trade as an “antique finish” because it resembles no antique piece ever known’, is used by the faker ‘chiefly because so many “collectors” (whose knowledge of the genuine article has been acquired by diligent, but unwitting study of the spurious) refuse to accept a straightforward piece unless it has been so maltreated’. Again, in the chapter on Lacquer Work, the author expresses the view that Chinese and Japanese lacquer is ‘infinitely superior to anything produced in Europe, but it does not realise the same prices, for some peculiar reason perhaps known to collectors or the trade. Some of the square cabinets, mounted on English carved and gilt wood stands, which appear to have had a great vogue from 1665 to 1685, are Chinese or Japanese, possessing all the perfection of detail and workmanship of those countries, yet I have known of several where the fine Oriental work has been obscured by a dirty varnish in the attempt, probably, to make it look English.’

In 168 pages of text and in the captions of 292 plates, Mr. Cescinsky writes a specification for the construction of an ‘expert’ in English furniture. He must know the character of design in any period. He must know the structural and ornamental methods and the tools used by the craftsmen. He must know the materials that were available. This book suggests how the foundations

of such knowledge may be laid, and in the last chapter the author issues a final warning about the hopelessness of legal redress for people who have bought fakes. 'It is far better to buy wisely and leave the law alone. After all, one can pay an expert a really fat fee, and then be considerably in pocket as compared with a law-costs bill.'

The book is dedicated to 'the memory of the late Adolph Shrager who acquired a second-hand but first-rate knowledge of both English Law and Antique Furniture by the simple process of paying for it in 1923'. Adolph Shrager was the plaintiff in the famous antique-furniture case that was a star turn in the English courts in 1923, and Mr. Cescinsky was the principal witness for the plaintiff. Furniture was sold to Shrager 'at massive prices', that same furniture afterwards realising 'the prices of bad second-hand goods at a well-known London auction-room, with the trade in attendance in full force'. Mr. Cescinsky's evidence 'was rebutted by the leading lights of the antique world, whose testimony in turn was contradicted in an unmistakable manner by the subsequent auction prices' (chap. vii, p. 54). There are constant references to this action in *The Gentle Art of Faking Furniture*, and nearly all of them are instructive. There was 'the celebrated "Royston Room", which was alleged to have come out of Royston Hall. . . . Actually there never was a "Royston Hall" at all, and the basis of the room was a few odd scraps of old paneling (afterwards all resurfaced during the reconstruction) taken from a dairy at Royston and used up. . . . The sum of £1972 was charged for the room, including its adaptation and fixing' (chap. ix, p. 73). A pair of cream lacquer cabinets were charged to Shrager at

1250 and sold the year after the case for £147. A pair of 'William and Mary red and gold lacquer stools' were charged at £250, valued by Mr. Cescinsky at £20, and ultimately fetched £27 : 6s. (chap. xii, p. 96).

Mr. Cescinsky flays the covering of romance from the 'antique' business, and underneath we perceive an activity that is often unscrupulous and generally ridiculous.

Mr. Cescinsky may or may not discourage you. He will at least convince you that collecting is more than a cheerful, heigh-ho-come-to-the-Caledonian-Market! sort of bargain hunt. If you are persuaded to examine the history of furniture in closer detail, your reading should be punctuated by visits to the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Geffrye Museum, and the various collections of old furniture which can be seen in different parts of England. The course of reading should begin with *The Dictionary of English Furniture*, edited by the late Percy MacQuoid and Ralph Edwards, and published in three volumes by Country Life Limited. Mr. Percy MacQuoid's *History of English Furniture* in four volumes can be studied with profit. It is a monumental work, and is conveniently divided into: (1) The Age of Oak; (2) The Age of Walnut; (3) The Age of Mahogany; (4) The Age of Satinwood. A most readable and informed writer on furniture is Mr. R. W. Symonds. Himself a designer of great capacity, and enjoying the essential background of architectural scholarship (lacking which, an appreciation of furniture design is apt to degenerate into the partisanship of the mere expert), Mr. Symonds has placed all students of English furniture design in his debt, notably by his books *The Present State of Old English Furniture* (published by Duck-

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worth) and *English Furniture from Charles II to George II* (The Connoisseur Ltd.).

For early English furniture, the works of Mr. Fred Roe, R.I., are commended for their fine illustrations and wealth of detailed information regarding early specimens. In particular, his *History of Oak Furniture* and *The Art of the Cofferer* should be read. *Early English Furniture and Woodwork* in two volumes by Herbert Cescinsky and Ernest Gribble (published by Routledge) contains a great number of valuable illustrations as well as lively and informative text. The second volume includes a chapter on domestic clocks.

An abundant store of illustrations dealing with the great age of English furniture-making will be found in the work of Thomas Arthur Strange, who has produced the most voluminous guide to the form of furniture that students of design or would-be collectors could possibly desire. This work has three thousand five hundred illustrations in line and is entitled *English Furniture, Decorative Woodwork and Allied Arts during the last half of the Seventeenth Century, the Whole of the Eighteenth Century, and the Earlier Part of the Nineteenth*. Mr. Cescinsky has written three volumes on *English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century* which form a pictorial record of great merit. The standard book on clocks is *Old Clocks and Watches and their Makers*, by F. J. Britten.

For a proper understanding of the *design* of furniture in any period, some appreciation of contemporary architecture is essential. In the invaluable work of Sir Banister Fletcher, P.P.R.I.B.A., *The History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, various plates are included which show the type of furniture and woodwork

contemporary with certain architectural periods. A 'Progress and Period Chart' of English design was published in the *Architectural Review* for July 1933. It was prepared by Mr. Raymond M'Grath, B.Arch., A.R.I.B.A., and covers the period 1500-1933, and deals with the principal types of furniture, and with clothes, shoes, vehicles and ships.

For well-written information about the architectural antecedents and environment of furniture the following books are recommended: *The Pleasures of Architecture*, by C. and A. Williams-Ellis (Cape, 'Life and Letters' Series), and *Architecture*, by Christian Barman (Benn's Sixpenny Library). For the appreciation of modern design in furniture, Noel Carrington's book *Design in the Home* (Country Life Limited) is a most lucid record of contemporary progress. An admirable little book has been written by Mr. John C. Rogers, A.R.I.B.A., entitled *Furniture and Furnishing* (Oxford University Press), which relates design to material, and deals also with historical prototypes. An earlier book of the writer's, *Time, Taste and Furniture*, was concerned in greater detail than this volume with the history and development of furniture-making, both in England and the American colonies, and it brought the history of English furniture up to 1925, and was issued before the Paris Exhibition had begun to make a number of changes in contemporary design. A new edition in 1930 did not provide an opportunity for re-writing, and as developments have taken place since 1925, it cannot now be regarded as a guide to the modern movement in furniture.

To understand the changes that have made the present period one of transition in architectural design,

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*The Pleasures of Architecture*, previously mentioned, should be supplemented by *Ghastly Good Taste*, by John Betjeman (Chapman and Hall, Limited), *The Appreciation of Architecture*, by Robert Byron (Wishart and Company), and *Men and Buildings* (Country Life Limited), by the present writer. For clear cold common sense about everything connected with design the reader should turn to the critical passages of Mr. Eric Gill's book, *Beauty Looks After Herself* (Sheed and Ward). As a corrective to the faintly depressing outlook upon contemporary civilisation which Mr. Gill's views may engender we would recommend *The Works of Man*, by Lisle March Phillipps (Duckworth). This book will re-adjust perspective about design, and it shows, chapter by chapter, how the thoughts and codes and habits of people everywhere at every time have been mirrored by the shape of the things they used and lived with and the character and embellishment of the buildings that sheltered their lives.

When people have understood the art of living, they have left behind them graceful things—furniture of intrinsic dignity, and a quiet pattern of beauty in the surroundings they created. In our age a concern with efficiency in living, in the mechanistic and hygienic sense, may for ever preclude us from a full enjoyment of leisure—when we have any leisure. But, as we said in the opening chapter, our furniture betrays our ideas to posterity in even greater detail than our architecture.

We cannot hide our lives or any of our ways from our descendants, however far they are separated from us by time, and however barbarous or affluent have been the gaps between their day and ours. Unless the wars of the

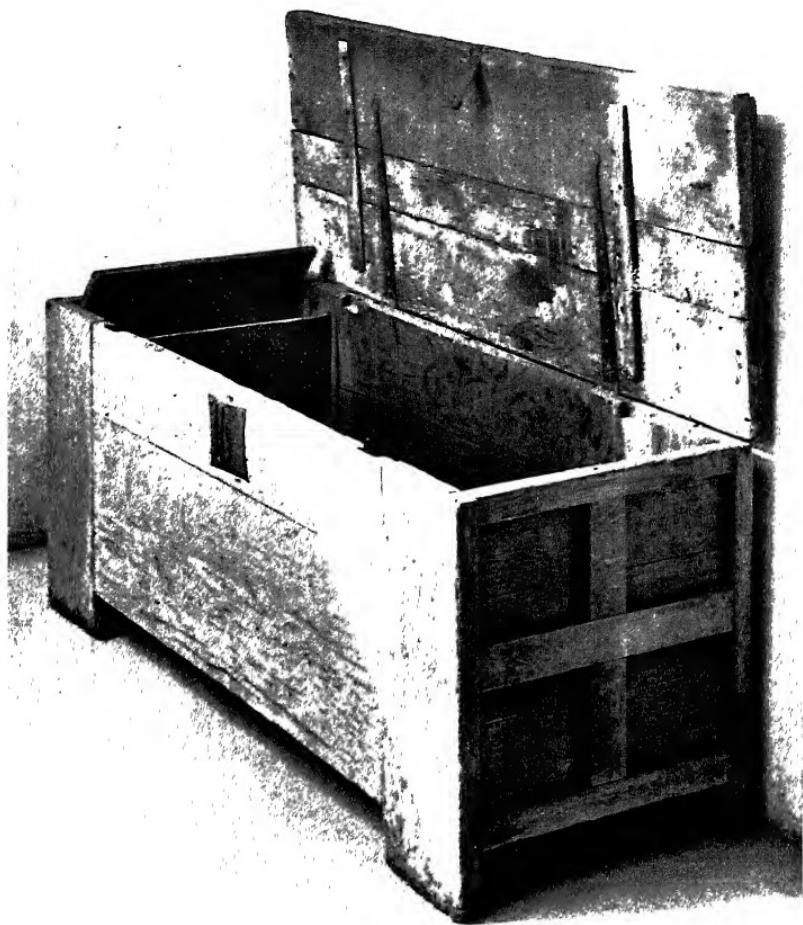
## ENGLISH FURNITURE

future destroy every material trace of the commercial machine age, all our little evasions of fact and our proud little efficiencies will be disclosed. Our furniture, about which dealers, designers, salesmen, craftsmen and critics have in their various ways told the tale, will tell the tale about us.

**PLATES II-XXIV**



PLATE II



A THIRTEENTH-CENTURY CHEST in oak, the simplest chest form slightly raised above the ground level. The ledge with its hinged lid seen at one side, is to accommodate sweet scented herbs such as lavender.



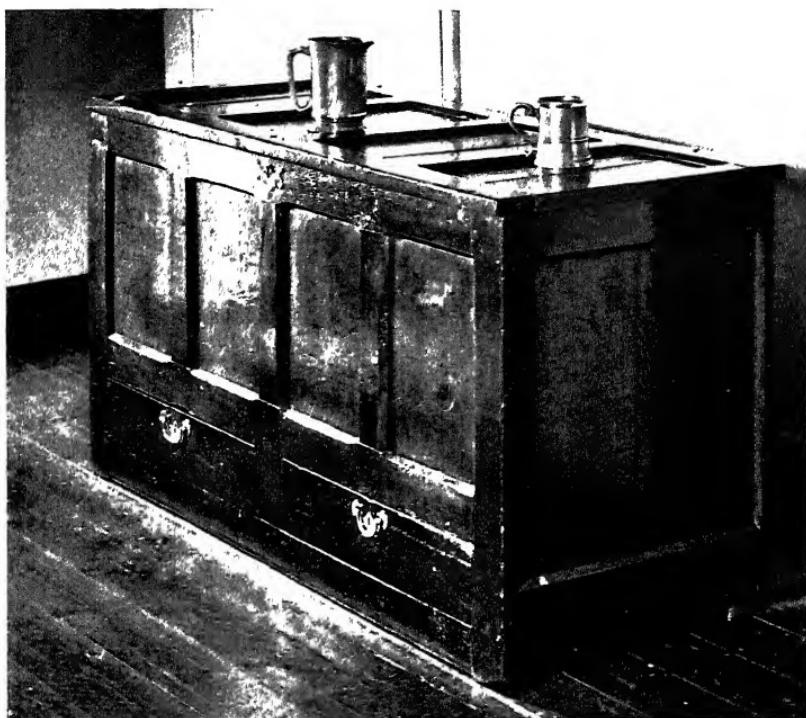


AN EARLY SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CHEST with very simple carving, a moulding being struck on the lower part of the top rail, the bottom rail being chamfered where it meets the panel.



A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CHEST with carved rails and panels.  
The illustration shows a refined development of early





A MULE CHEST in oak showing the transition between the chest that was merely a box with a lid and the more elaborate development that culminated in the chest-of-drawers and the tall-boy. Chests of this type were made any time between 1640 and 1670.



PLATE V

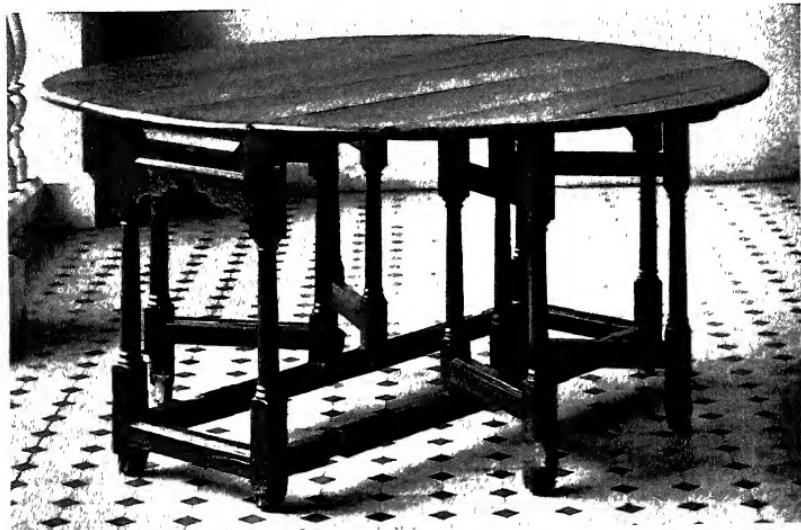


A Court-cupboard with drawers and cupboards in the lower part. A fine oak piece of the early Stuart period, probably made about 1630. The cock's head hinges on the doors of the cupboard are of early type. The fluted fronts of the drawers and the bottom rail show an intelligent borrowing of architectural ornament and the columns in the upper part indicate a desire to use turning decoratively rather than to caricature by means of this process some unfortunate classic prototype. There are lines of punched ornament in the flat members of the moulding on the cupboard doors of the upper part, and another line of punched ornament appears below the drawers. The ladder-back rush-seated chair is an early eighteenth-century type, a country-made piece in ash, with a suggestion of deference to town fashions in the rudimentary hoof feet of the front legs.





AN OAK TWO-LEAF GATE-LEG TABLE with "barley sugar" twist legs in their correct opulent proportions. Compare them with the spidery spirals of machine-made, furniture trade, "Jaco". The chair is a ladder-back early eighteenth-century type in ash. Compare it with the chair on Plate V, and observe the competence of the English country craftsman to achieve variety.



A DOUBLE GATE-LEG TABLE in oak, *circa* 1670-80. The legs are careful reproductions of Doric columns. The panel in the end, recalling the linen-fold device, is unusual. The restraint of Puritan design is here

...of architectural proportions





A CHARLES II ELBOW CHAIR in walnut with turned underframing and legs. The traditional rigidity of English chair design still lingers in the form of this piece, despite the rather effusive gaiety of its decoration. The table is a late seventeenth-century design, showing Dutch influence in the legs, which are tapered as well as twisted, and particularly in the bulbous feet.





A CHARLES II CHEST in veneered walnut. This is a further development of the chest form. The box with a drawer underneath is now mounted upon legs. The decoration of this chest depends almost wholly upon the use of oysterwood veneering and cross-banding in sycamore on the edges of the panels, the top and the drawer. The drop handles on the drawer, the bun feet, as well as the veneering, are indications of Dutch influence.





A LONG CASE CLOCK in figured walnut. *Circa 1710-15.* A reflection of contemporary architectural design: look at this, then think of the steeples created by Wren, Hawksmoor and Gibbs. The table is in Virginia walnut, a Queen Anne piece with a modified cabriole leg, and light relief carving on the hoof feet. The mirror is early Georgian with a walnut and gilt gesso frame.



PLATE X



A GEORGIAN elaboration of the chest form. Circa 1740-45. A mahogany piece with carved legs and claw feet and one long drawer. With the use of mahogany the habit of including a ledge for scented herbs was discontinued. Mahogany was often cedar-lined which provided an aromatic scent inside the chest.





Two COUNTRY-MADE PIECES

*Above:* A mid-eighteenth-century Windsor chair in yew and oak.  
*Below:* A late eighteenth-century oak settle with a panelled back (probably from Yorkshire), that shows the crude attempt of the country craftsman to reproduce the cabriole leg and the ball foot.



PLATE XII



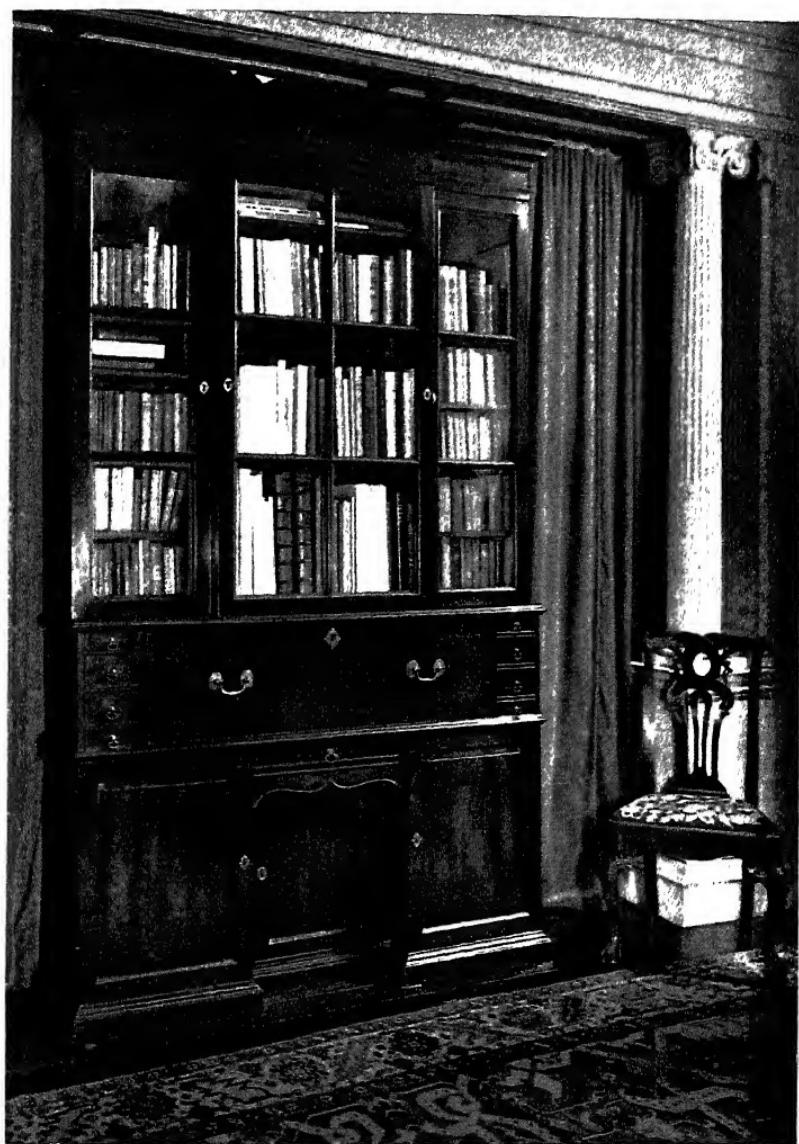
A MAHOGANY PRESS of the early Georgian period. *Circa 1725-30.* There are four cabriole, claw-footed legs to the base; one of the marks of a fine piece, for often only the front legs would be carved and finished with any elaboration. The chair is later, about 1740, in walnut, with carved shell ornament on the knees of the front legs.





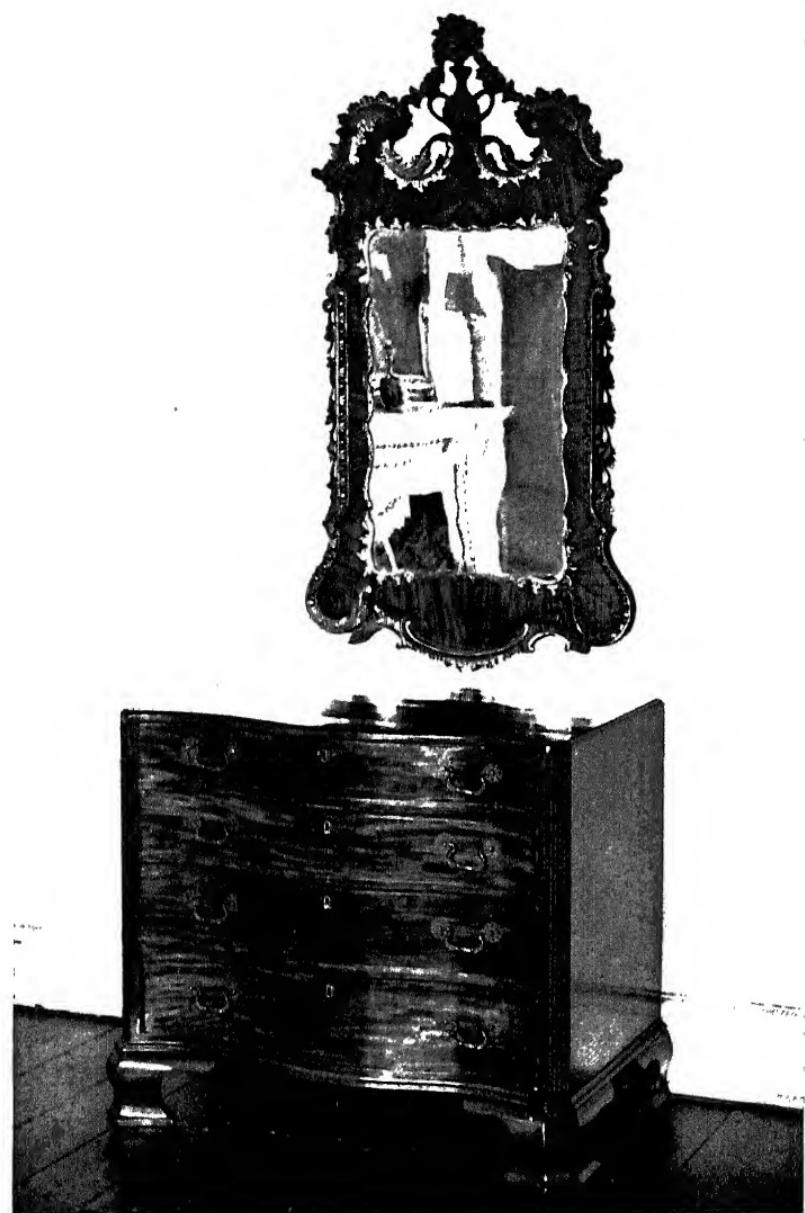
A CEDAR-LINED PRESS in mahogany. *Circa* 1740. In every line it suggests the reign of the architects over furniture design; it is strongly influenced by the work of Batty Langley. The barometer is much later in date, 1770, with a typical Hepplewhite twist in the base. Its fittings are of brass.





A BUREAU-BOOKCASE with a fall-front drawer and a knee hole. The big square panes in the glazed doors are almost seventeenth century in character although this is a mid-eighteenth-century piece, made between 1740 and 1750. The chair is a little earlier, 1735-45, and still retains the bold richness of the early Georgian period in its front legs.





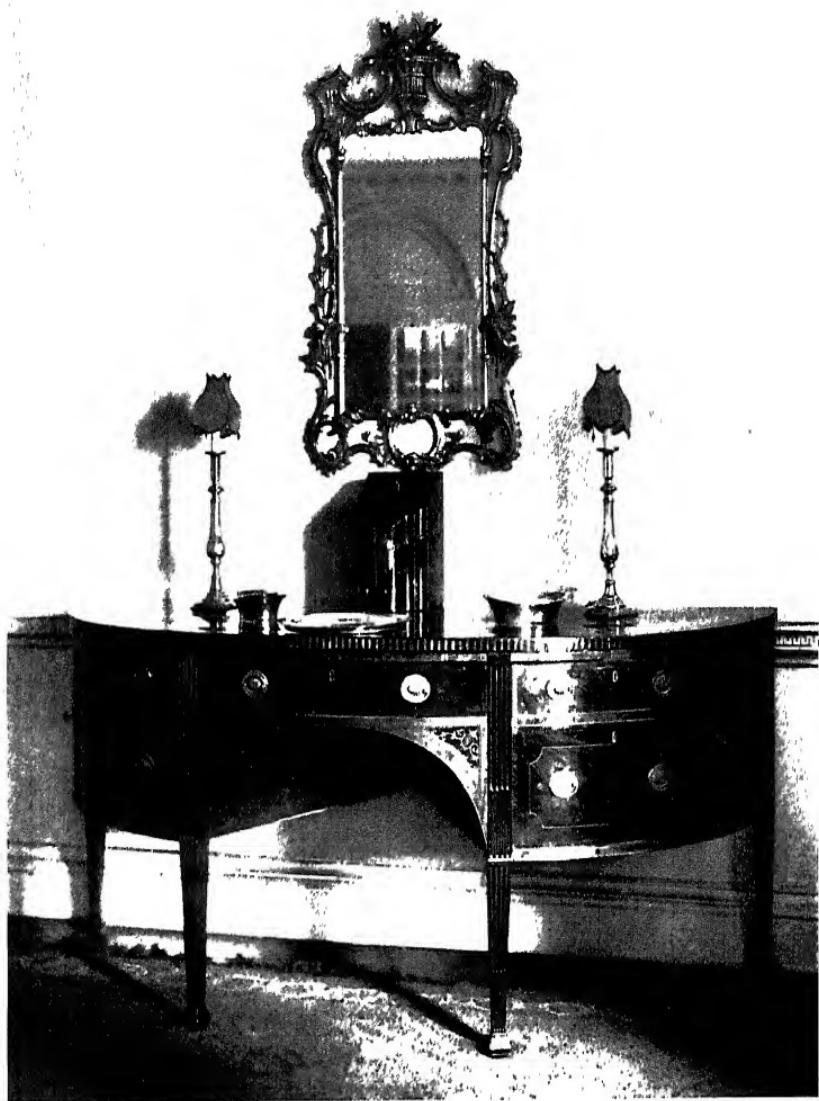
A SERPENTINE-FRONTED CHEST in mahogany with fluted angles. The top drawer is fitted for use as a dressing- or writing-table. *Circa 1740-50.* The mirror above has a mahogany frame edged with carved and gilded ornament. *Circa 1730-40.*





A TALL-BOY in mahogany, the final sky-scraper form of the chest. Again the influence of architectural control is visible in the fret on the frieze, the cornice with its dentals, the vertical flutes of the angles of the upper part and the general nobility of proportion. *Circa* 1740-50. The mirror is early Georgian with a mahogany frame enriched by gilded mouldings and carving. The chair is a rare Chippendale type, exquisitely carved in low relief, showing how sanely and competently English chair makers used ornament and achieved richness without sacrificing stability or comfort. *Circa* 1760-70.





AN ELLIPTICAL LATE-EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MAHOGANY SIDEBOARD with fluted legs and satinwood inlay in the spandrels of the arched front. The gilded mirror is a restrained example of ornamental work. *Circa 1760-70.*





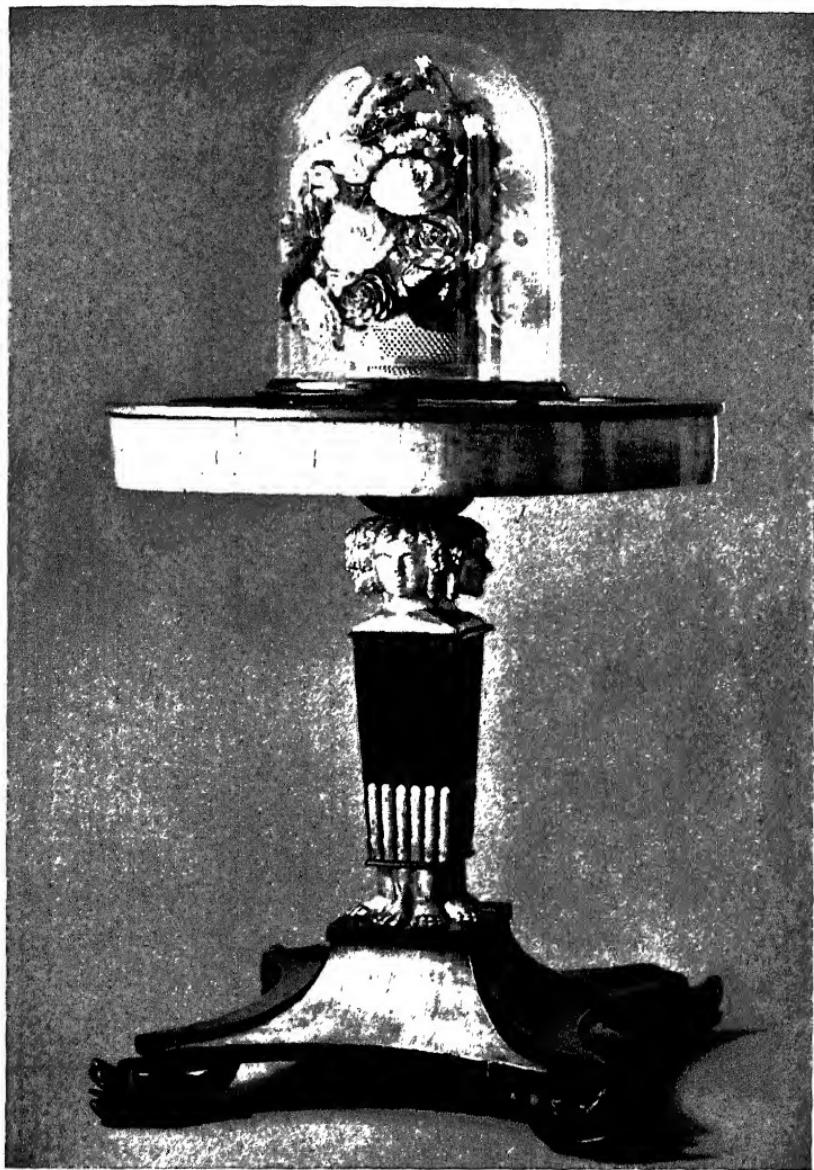
A LONG CASE CLOCK in mahogany, stamped *George Augustus* and probably made for one of the Royal Palaces. *Circa 1810.* The chair is of the same period. The Sphinx heads show how prevailing French fashions were sedately reflected by English furniture design.





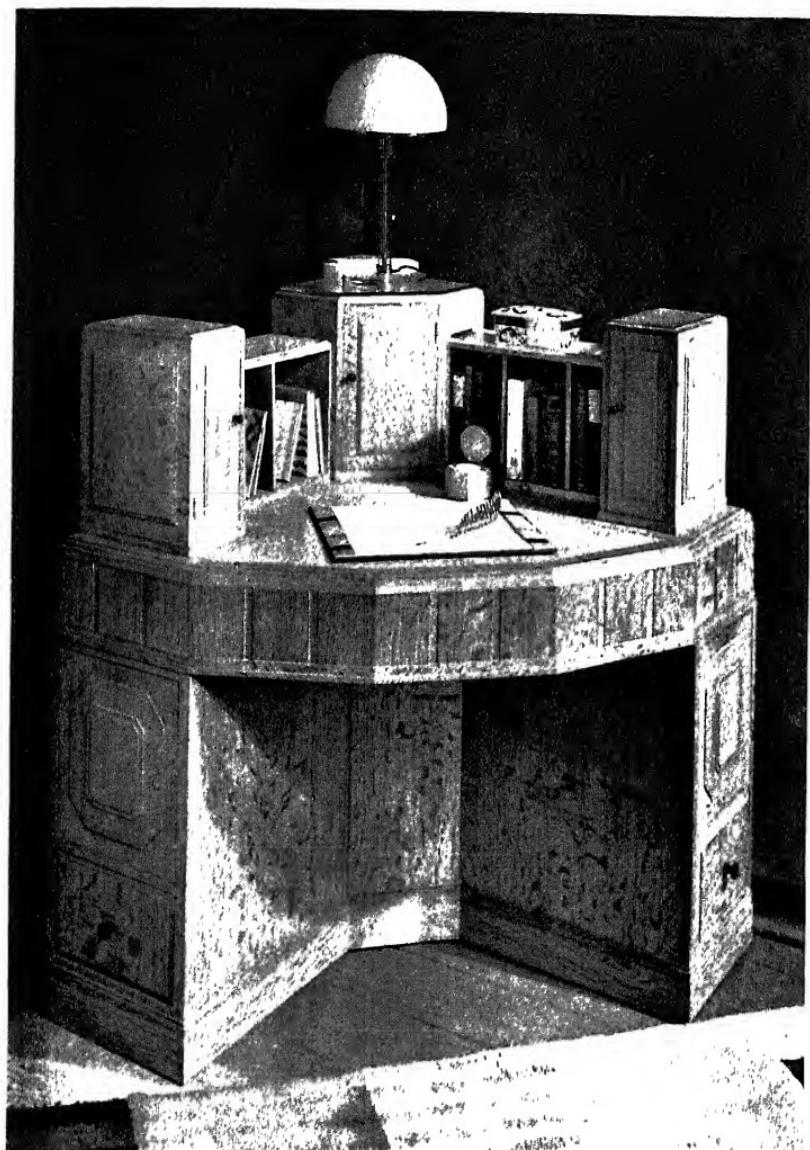
AN ENGLISH EMPIRE Book-case in black painted wood with gilded fluting and decoration. Above is a modern mirror in black and gold designed and made by Joseph Armitage.





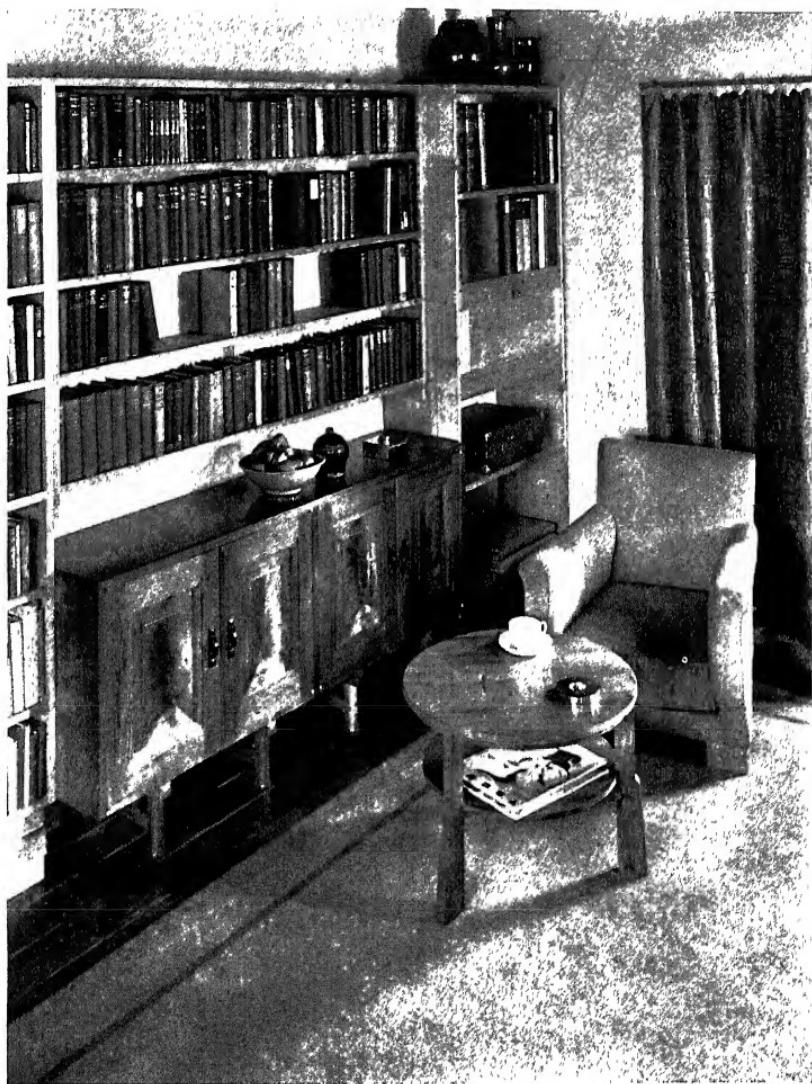
A unique and eccentric example of early nineteenth-century design. *Circa 1810-15.* Probably the work of Thomas Hope. The base is supported on dogs' heads, and the table is of satinwood, partly polished, partly ebonised, with gilding on the heads and feet of the figures. It has a black marble top. Its proportions are excellent: design had not yet degenerated when this queer piece was made; but what later age could indulge in such fooling without vulgarity?





A WEATHERED-OAK CORNER WRITING-TABLE designed in 1930 by Sir Ambrose Heal. The central cupboard accommodates a telephone, and there are drawers and trays in the pedestals and a cupboard at the back of the kneehole. An example of compact design, planned for the small rooms of modern houses and flats.

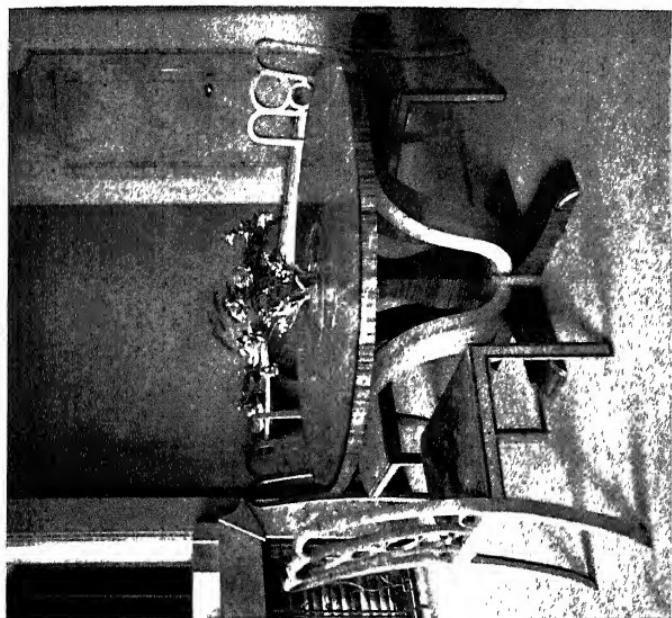




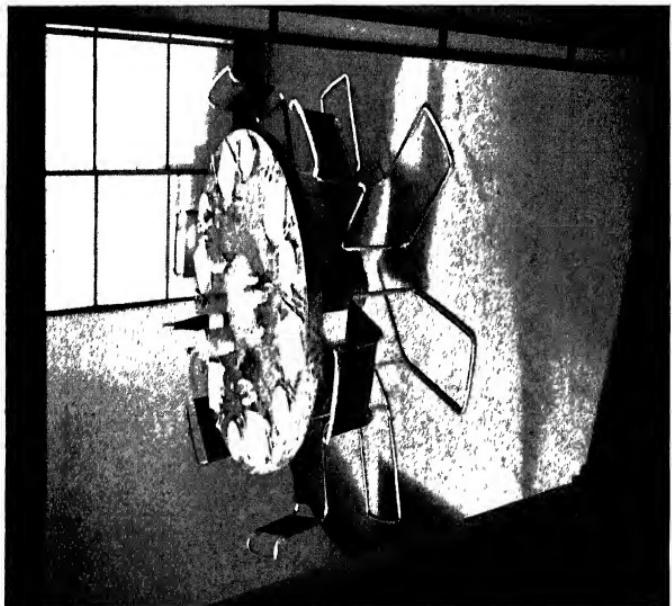
A SIDEBOARD AND TABLE in brown oak designed by Gordon Russell. Compare this sideboard with the chests on Plate III and the court cupboard on Plate V: they belong to the same race, clearly, but how much more the twentieth-century designer knows about the choosing and handling of wood and about appropriate embellishment. The notching of the chamfers on the feet of the modern piece has contented its designer, and he has fielded the panels of the cupboard doors to increase the play of light and shade upon the rich figuring of his material.



PLATE XXIII

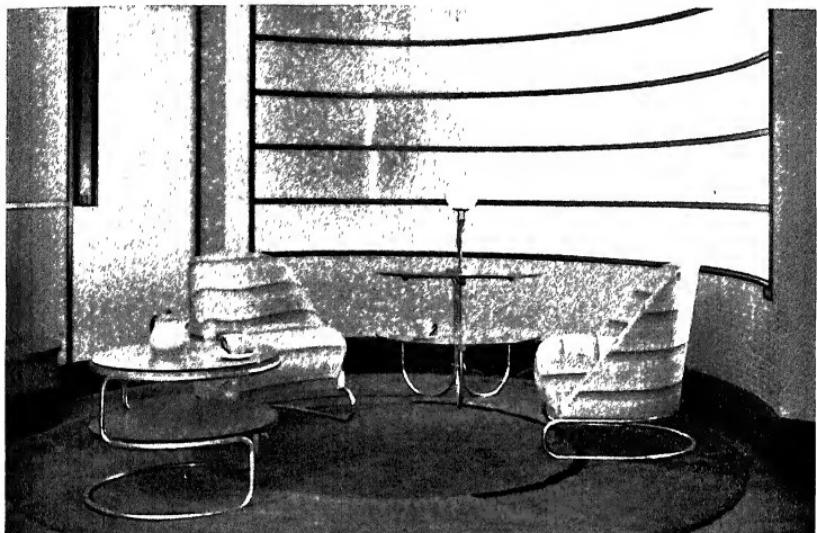


CIRCULAR DINING-TABLE which can be made to extend by the attachment of an outer rim in segments. The table and chairs are veneered with burr ash, walnut and zebra. Designed by D. W. C.



DINING-ROOM FURNITURE designed by Wells Coates. The tubular chairs are plated in copper. The table is veneered in English burr walnut.





STEEL TUBING manipulated to clasp upholstered seats and trays of plywood and glass. The glass rests upon balls of rubber. The steel is chromium plated. Designed by Raymond M'Grath, B.Arch., A.R.I.B.A.



FURNITURE that employs some new materials. A table with a top of inlaid "ruboleum" and a sideboard of Honduras mahogany. The manipulated tubing that supports the table, chair and sideboard has a black oxidised finish. Designed for B. Cohen & Sons, Ltd.



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Where the reference is printed in italics, thus: *England Under Queen Anne*, it concerns a book or a periodical that has been quoted or mentioned in the text.

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